



# Russia's Foreign Policy After Crimea: How to Understand and Address It

PONARS Eurasia Policy Perspectives

September 2017

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EURASIA

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Institute for  
European, Russian,  
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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

# **Russian Foreign Policy after Crimea**

## HOW TO UNDERSTAND AND ADDRESS IT

PONARS Eurasia  
POLICY PERSPECTIVES  
SEPTEMBER 2017



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PONARS Eurasia is an international network of scholars advancing new approaches to research on security, politics, economics, and society in Russia and Eurasia. PONARS Eurasia is based at the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies ([IERES](#)) at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. This publication was made possible in part by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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# Foreword

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This booklet discusses the evolution of Russia's foreign policy since the dramatic turn of 2014, which deeply impacted the relationship between Russia and Western countries, and Russia's place in the world more globally. Several authors suggest that Moscow's behavior is driven by the logic of "self-esteem" policy—that is, it demands recognition by the international scene's main actors, in particular the United States.

From the perspective Moscow publicly advances, the country's foreign policy and military goals are mostly defensive and seek to ensure the survival of the state; the Kremlin insists on the need for the West to refrain from interfering in what Moscow sees as its sphere of influence and responsibility. However, there have been several cases when Russia has used force against other actors. Over the last few years, it has also demonstrated that it has acquired new conventional-strike capabilities, with potential implications that go far beyond military utility.

Russian foreign policy remains focused on Europe and the United States. Moscow looks to improve its soft power tools, targeting Western audiences and potential sympathizers—whether motivated by ideology or pragmatism—as well as to protect what it sees as its challenged sovereignty in the case of Ukraine. If mutual meddling in foreign affairs is nothing new, there are also several areas of potential cooperation between Russia and the West, such as the struggle against terrorism.

But it is apparent that Russia hopes for more than restored status in the eyes of the West. It has launched several diplomatic and symbolic initiatives in the Arctic; has to manage a complex relationship with China, based on both concrete cooperation and a low ceiling for more genuine synergies; and has become deeply (re-)involved in the Middle-East, thanks to its military engagement in Syria and an ambivalent partnership with Turkey and Iran. Yet, Moscow's expectation of leading a non-Western world, dependent on a set of favorable but temporary circumstances, has partly faded, while the country has continued to produce several geopolitical toolkits to be used for its neighborhood policy, from Eurasianism to the Russian World doctrine.



## **I. Russia's Views and Perceptions**



# Russia's Strategic Calculus

## THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND MILITARY DOCTRINE

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 448

November 2016

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Russian foreign policy is driven by the political elites' search for a new basis for [national self-esteem](#) after the collapse of the Soviet Union disrupted old Soviet identities. The collapse did not discredit the Soviet Union's status as a great power, which has thus remained a core aspiration for Russian political elites. As a result of their perception of Russia's appropriate status in the world and in their region, they have also sought to maintain Russia's role as a guiding force among the newly independent states that formerly made up the Soviet Union. This combination of Russia as a global great power and regional hegemon is seen as providing the ruling elite with a source of legitimacy with their domestic constituency.

Most of Russia's immediate foreign policy goals are focused on its immediate neighborhood. These include maintaining friendly or at least compliant governments in neighboring states and, failing that, keeping unfriendly neighboring governments weak and off balance. All of this is placed in a global context because in addition to securing its periphery, these goals also serve to prevent encroachment by Western states in Russia's desired geographic sphere of influence.

Beyond these overarching goals, Russian leaders are focused on ensuring Russia's domestic stability, territorial integrity, and sovereignty. These are primarily defensive goals that seek to ensure the survival of the state and its ruling elite in their current form, rather than aggressive goals that seek to expand Russia's territory or its sphere of influence. Most of Russia's military and security policies are designed to secure the state and its current territory against potential attacks and to counter the threats that Russian leaders see facing their country. Moreover, Russian leaders do not really have a well-developed strategy on how to achieve this in their immediate neighborhood. Instead, they have a toolkit of political and military tactics and are open to opportunities to use this toolkit.

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## Russia's Threat Perception

The main threats to Russian security, as identified by Russia's political and military leadership, are spelled out in the most recent edition of the country's military doctrine announced in December 2014 (see the [English translation](#) of the doctrine). According to these guidelines, the most serious military risk that Russia faces is the expansion of NATO. The potential of NATO enlargement to include former Soviet republics has been seen as a threat by Russian leaders for many years, with concern about Ukraine and Georgia resulting in Russian involvement in conflicts in both of those countries.

While this concern remains uppermost in Russian leaders' minds, in recent years they have also come to focus on the expansion of NATO military infrastructure in existing member states near Russia's borders. The doctrine accordingly identifies military risks associated with "bringing the military infrastructure of NATO member countries near the borders of the Russian Federation" and with the "deployment (build-up) of military contingents of foreign states (groups of states) on the territories of states contiguous with the Russian Federation and its allies, as well as in adjacent waters, including for exerting political and military pressure on the Russian Federation" (Russian Military Doctrine, 12a and 12c).

The 2014 military doctrine was the first official document to highlight the military threat posed to Russia by externally organized regime change. In recent years, this has been repeatedly mentioned as the most serious threat facing the Russian government, but it had not previously been portrayed as a military threat. By mentioning the "destabilization of the situation in individual states and regions and undermining of global and regional stability" and the "establishment of regimes whose policies threaten the interests of the Russian Federation in states contiguous with the Russian Federation, including by overthrowing legitimate state administration bodies" as external military risks, Russian leaders highlighted their perception that regime change originates in secret plans organized abroad, primarily by the United States and its allies (Doctrine, 12b and 12m).

These plans, Russian leaders argue, include a number of aspects. The establishment of hostile regimes in neighboring states through the destabilization of legitimate governments is seen as being part of a [campaign](#) to eliminate Russian influence over neighbors that are of vital importance to Russia's security. In addition, Russia's adversaries are willing to sow chaos in foreign states in order to create excuses to intervene and establish pro-Western governments there. Finally, even though these efforts mostly take place outside Russia itself, their ultimate goal is to weaken the Russian government in order to create an opportunity to replace the Putin regime with one more amenable to Western dictates. In addition to military and political means to achieve these goals, Russian leaders are concerned about the use of information warfare to weaken Russian sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity

(Doctrine, 12l). This is part of an overall emphasis on internal threats and the role of state policy in [countering](#) Western interference in Russian domestic affairs.

A third set of security risks faced by Russia concern threats to its nuclear deterrence capability. Missile defense remains at the top of this list, as Russian leaders [do not believe](#) that the United States can make a credible commitment to refrain from using such defenses against Russia's nuclear deterrent capability. They are convinced that if the United States were able to develop an effective and financially viable form of defense against ballistic missiles, domestic political pressure would result in it being expanded to counter Russian missiles, regardless of any promises that the leaders of the United States might make in the interim that missile defense is aimed only against rogue states such as Iran and North Korea.

Russian leaders' concerns about threats to Russian nuclear deterrence capabilities have in recent years moved beyond missile defense to include a variety of new technologies, such as the Prompt Global Strike concept for the development of conventional strategic precision-guided munitions and weapons fired from space. The 2014 military doctrine adds these weapons to the list of military risks faced by Russia (Doctrine, 12d). As with missile defense, the concern is that the United States might use such weapons to eliminate Russian nuclear deterrent capability, rendering it defenseless against a NATO or U.S. attack.

Finally, Russian leaders express a genuine concern about the threat posed to Russia by radical Islamist organizations. This concern is usually articulated through the discussion of global terrorism and extremism. The Russian military doctrine highlights the links between radical international armed groupings and inter-ethnic and inter-confessional tensions in the context of a lack of effective international anti-terrorist cooperation (Doctrine, 12j and 12k). The [significance of this concern](#) for Russian leaders is highlighted by its choice as the main theme of the 2016 Moscow Conference on International Security. Given Russia's recent history with Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus and terrorist acts committed throughout Russia by extremists over the last 20 years, Russian leaders recognize the potential for a renewed wave of attacks to destabilize the Russian state.

As is usually the case, the Russian military doctrine does not mention any threats posed by China. Ostensibly, this is because Russia considers China a strategic partner rather than a potential threat. Nevertheless, Russian experts regularly discuss the potential long-term risk of Chinese designs on Russian territory in the Far East and regularly contemplate the short-term danger of Russia becoming excessively dependent on China and being reduced to a Chinese junior partner and energy supplier. Furthermore, the Russian military regularly conducts exercises that are designed to counter a land invasion by a major power in the Far East and Siberia. Although no country is

mentioned as the target of these exercises, China is the only country that [could threaten](#) Russia with a land invasion from the east.

Overall, in recent years, Russian leaders have become more concerned about the threats they feel are emanating from NATO and the United States. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring and especially after the electoral protests that took place in Russia in 2011-12, they started to emphasize the danger to Russia posed by externally fomented domestic protests and regime change. These combined changes in Russian threat perceptions contributed to a serious deterioration in Russia's relations with the West even before the Ukraine conflict erupted in 2014.

Western planners need to keep in mind that Russian leaders see Russia as weaker than its adversaries and very much on the defensive. This does not preclude a concurrent belief that Russia needs to be proactive and to initiate conflict when critical state interests are threatened and opportunities to seize the initiative present themselves. As a result, Western observers often see Russia as having an aggressive and revanchist mindset, even as Russian leaders perceive their actions as aimed entirely at shoring up their vulnerable security position.

### **Regional Priorities**

Russian foreign policy remains focused on Europe and the United States. Since the international system remains centered on Euro-Atlantic institutions, Russia's drive for respect in the international system and the geographic proximity of its main population centers to Europe means that Europe remains the primary geographic region of focus for Russian foreign policy. Russian interests in Europe are both economic and political. Economic interests are related primarily to energy sales, while politically Russia seeks to weaken European institutions in order to work bilaterally with individual states.

Russia's second area of concern is its vulnerable southern border. Russian policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus has in recent years been shaped by three divergent perspectives: 1) great power competition in the region, which leads Russian politicians to view the region's problems through a geopolitical and military lens; 2) energy, with a focus on securing exclusive rights for gas and oil transit from the region to Europe; and 3) concern about transnational security threats, such as radical Islamism, terrorism, and drug smuggling.

The internal tension among these perspectives has been the main source of inconsistency in Russian policies in the region. Depending on which perspective is in ascendance, Russian officials alternate between a) focusing on soft security threats, which are best dealt with through the development of cooperative mechanisms with states both in and outside the region, and b) taking steps to limit the influence of outside states in the region as part of an effort to retain a monopoly on energy transit and to come out on top

in its rivalry with the United States. In recent years, with the fading of U.S. involvement in Central Asia and the decline in energy prices, Russia has become more focused on ensuring that the region is ruled by friendly regimes and supporting their efforts to prevent internal uprisings and infiltration by Islamist extremists.

In recent years, the Middle East has become more important for Russian foreign policy. Russia's key goals in the region are to reduce instability while increasing its own influence and reducing that of the United States. Russian leaders see U.S. policies that promote democratization as being the main cause of chaos and instability throughout the region. At the same time, Moscow's interests in the Middle East have clearly benefited from overreach by the United States. Russia has worked to use local dissatisfaction with the conduct of the Iraq war and U.S. support for popular protests against local autocrats to restore some of the influence it lost in the Middle East after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Russian operation in Syria has done even more to this end, showing that Russia has the interest and resources to be a serious player in the region. The establishment of a permanent military presence in Syria over the last year has further increased Russian influence in the Middle East, to the extent that [some analysts argue](#) that Russia now has a commanding position in Syria and perhaps in the region as a whole.

Russia's involvement in the Middle East is fraught with risks as well. The de facto Shia alliance with Iran, Iraq, and Syria has led to tension with Gulf states and (in the recent past) with Turkey and also brings Russia into direct confrontation with ISIS, potentially exposing it to a higher risk of terrorist attacks against Russian interests and/or on Russian territory.

Finally, Russia's turn toward Asia has so far been expressed more in rhetoric than in actual policy. Russian elites are starting to realize that Asia matters in its own right, not just as an adjunct or counterbalance to the West. But so far they have been more adept at recognizing the importance of Asia than in developing effective strategies for engaging with it. In part, this is because old stereotypes of Asia as inferior still dominate. But mostly it is because it is hard to reconcile the pursuit of Russian security and economic interests in Asia with the Russian political elite's Western-centric worldview.

Even in Asia, U.S. behavior in large part determines how Russia responds, since containing and balancing the United States is one of the key missions of Russian foreign policy around the world. This stems in large part from Russian leaders' belief that Russia can be a global power only by limiting the influence of the United States. In Asia, it has tried to do so (with limited success) by building an anti-hegemonic consensus with China and India. At the same time, despite the currently positive relations with China, Russian leaders remain concerned about China's increase in power and long-term intentions, particularly given China's efforts to develop the Silk Road project. They

worry that China could replace Russia as the dominant “other” in U.S. foreign affairs, leaving Russia marginalized. For this reason, despite ongoing tension with the United States, Russian leaders are not averse to having the United States work to constrain Chinese ambitions in Asia and around the world. On the whole, Russian objectives in Asia are preventative in nature: containing the United States and China, maintaining Russian influence in the region, and eroding US-led alliances without destabilizing the region, all while staying out of local conflicts.

## **Conclusion**

The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States is unlikely to change Russia's strategic calculus. Russia will continue to seek to maximize its status in the world, possibly by proposing a deal where the United States recognizes its sphere of influence in its immediate neighborhood in exchange for a more cooperative relationship globally. Such a trade would legitimize Russia as a global great power while avoiding the need to expend scarce resources on a global fight for influence with the United States.

# Russia's Use of Military Force as a Foreign Policy Tool

## IS THERE A LOGIC?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 443

October 2016

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Russia has used its military beyond its borders with unprecedented frequency in the period since the invasion of Crimea in February 2014. Depending on how one counts, there are up to five cases of the use of force that followed Crimea:

- Support for the insurgency in the Donbas from March 2014.
- Direct military intervention that culminated in Ilovaisk in late August 2014.
- Intervention that ended with separatist seizure of Debaltseve in January-February 2015.
- Intervention in Syria from September 2015.
- Brinksmanship in the skies and on the seas with NATO and other Western militaries.

This behavior has understandably raised concerns about a new Russian militarism, particularly following the Syria intervention, Moscow's first major military operation outside the former-Soviet region since Afghanistan. A close examination reveals significant commonalities across the post-2014 cases, which suggest that there is a pattern or even logic to Russian behavior. Given the nature of the current international environment, it is likely that they will not be the last such cases.

### **Compellence and Coercive Bargaining Processes**

All cases of the Russian use of force since 2014 share a fundamental similarity: Moscow deployed its military in order to achieve a policy goal. Tactical military objectives were driven by the policy mission; put differently, there have been no purely military goals. Russia's use of force is thus best understood as a means of coercion. As Thomas Schelling writes in his 1966 classic *Arms and Influence* (2008 edition, p. 5): "the difference between coercion and brute force is as often in the intent as in the instrument. To hunt

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down Comanches and to exterminate them was brute force; to raid their villages to make them behave was coercive diplomacy, based on the power to hurt.”

Schelling classifies coercive military acts as either deterrence, aimed at preventing adversary behaviors, or compellence—threatening or taking action to force the adversary to do something. The adversary must do that thing for the pain to stop. As Schelling notes, compellence entails “inducing his withdrawal, acquiescence or his collaboration by an action that threatens to hurt, often one that could not forcibly accomplish its aim but that, nevertheless, can hurt enough to induce compliance” (p. 79).

The Russian cases of the use of force clearly were acts of compellence. For example, the devastation of the Ukrainian forces at Ilovaisk did not result in their total defeat but did demonstrate Moscow's willingness to hurt, and thus (at least temporarily) forced Kyiv to change its behavior. Russia's intention was not just to change the Ukrainian military's behavior; it also forced President Petro Poroshenko to the negotiating table and produced Minsk I. As Vladimir Lukin, the former Russian Ambassador to the United States who has been involved in Ukraine policy in several capacities since 2014, [said](#): “Forget about DNR and LNR. The objective [of the August 2014 counteroffensive] is to explain to Poroshenko that he will never prevail ... [The Kremlin] will send in however many troops are necessary to make Poroshenko understand this and sit down at the table with whomever Putin wants.”

We should therefore understand the military component of Russian policy as one element of a broader coercive bargaining process related to political outcomes. Schelling notes that “this kind of conflict ... is a process of bargaining—of threats and demands, proposals and counter-proposals, of giving reassurances and making trades or concessions, signaling intent and communicating the limits of one's tolerance, of getting a reputation and giving lessons” (p. 135).

There is no firm line between war and diplomacy in such a conflict. Seen in this context, the six cases fit into three distinct coercive bargaining processes. All the Ukraine cases were elements of Russia's campaign to block Ukraine's Western integration that began in the summer of 2013. The Syria intervention is part of the international bargaining process over the civil war that dates from 2011. And the NATO brinksmanship seems to be linked to the efforts Russia has been undertaking for many years to push back against increased military activity—particularly U.S. military activity—along its borders.\*

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\* Schelling explicitly describes brinksmanship as a form of compellence through “manipulat[ion of] the shared risk of war”: “It involves setting afoot an activity that may get out of hand, initiating a process that carries some risk of unintended disaster. The risk is intended, but not the disaster.” The risk is “exploited [in order] to intimidate” (pp. 99, 91, 102).

## Common Threads

The three processes are similar on a number of levels. First, and most importantly, the use of force has come after other non-kinetic means have been tried and are seen to have failed. Put differently, the use of force is a last resort. Russia tries to achieve its objectives using diplomacy, economic pressure, threats, etc., and only when it still has not succeeded does it resort to the military tool. In the six months before the invasion of Crimea, Moscow threatened and then implemented economic sanctions (July-September 2013), offered a whopping \$15 billion in economic assistance (December 2013), and engaged in diplomacy with the West (the February 21, 2014 agreement) prior to using the military. In Syria, Moscow had engaged in extensive diplomatic outreach, conducted arms transfers, and even attempted to organize the opposition before concluding that the only means of getting a settlement on its terms was to use the military to change the balance. A key implication is that we should see Moscow's *failures* to get what it wants as warning signs for potential use of force.

But Moscow often fails to get what it wants. It only has intervened when the stakes are perceived to be high relative to other regional or global crises. Worst-case scenario outcomes in either Syria and especially Ukraine—and in the clash with NATO—would have been very detrimental for Russia's security (as seen by the Kremlin). All three coercive bargaining processes that reached the threshold for the use of force were thus tied into core national security or "regime security" concerns. In addition, Moscow's objective has been to prevent or reverse (perceived) geopolitical loss, not to make new geopolitical gains. Russia wanted to *return* Ukraine to its orbit after the Maidan revolution seemed to snatch it away; *sustain* the regime in Syria from rebel overthrow; and *block* new NATO deployments in an area where previously there had been none. We have yet to see military force used to extend Russian influence where it did not exist before or dramatically change existing balances in Russia's favor.

The military operations in all three processes share several important characteristics as well. Moscow has used just enough force to get the policy job done, but not more. For example, the late August 2014 intervention only came when the approach of using separatist proxies was on the verge of catastrophic failure. That intervention itself was limited; no high-end capabilities were employed, and the majority of the forces massed at the border never crossed it. As soon as the Ukrainians agreed to Minsk I, the Russian regulars largely left. Schelling notes that the limited use of force is a characteristic of coercion: "coercive warfare can be conducted by degree, in measured doses, in a way that purely military engagements—'battlefield engagements'—tend not to be" (p. 172). Schelling identifies three reasons. First, in coercive warfare violence is important mostly because of its knock-on effects: "coercion depends more on the threat of what is yet to come than on damage already done. The pace of diplomacy, not the pace of battle, would govern the action; and while diplomacy may not require that it go slowly, it does require that an impressive unspent capacity for damage be kept in reserve" (p. 172).

Second, the speedy use of overwhelming force is needed to achieve military objectives, but not it might not be needed to achieve political ones. Finally, and most importantly, the objective of coercive warfare is to “make the enemy behave,” not to annihilate him (p. 173).

Finally, Russia has portrayed the use of force in all these cases as consistent with international law. In Crimea, the Black Sea Fleet basing agreement and the principle of self-determination were invoked. In the Donbas, the Russian leadership denies the fact of the intervention itself. In Syria, the Kremlin regularly notes that the military is there at Assad's invitation. These arguments serve two purposes. First, they provide a veneer of international-legal “legitimacy” that allows Russia to bolster its reputation as a responsible great power. Second, they signal the Kremlin's peculiar form of commitment to the international system as defined by the UN Charter. By Russia's standards, under which the P5 have the right to bend the rules when necessary but should always claim to be following them, its actions have not been “revisionist.” Revisionism, in this view, entails not just breaking the rules, but flaunting the violation.

It is important to note that armed compellence can be self-defeating: coercive pressure can sometimes produce resistance, not compliance. Schelling uses the example of the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam, which spectacularly failed to achieve the objective of ending the latter's support for the Vietcong. In Ukraine and Syria, the use of force has been far more effective at getting the West to the table than it has been in inducing compliance from actors on the ground. Even a significant escalation in Ukraine could not generate support for accepting Russia's terms for a political settlement. And while the bombing in Syria succeeded in repeatedly getting U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on a plane to Moscow and Geneva, the Syrian opposition has proven more resistant to such coercion.

## Conclusions

Two conclusions can be drawn from the analysis presented here—one reassuring, the other disconcerting. On the one hand, the clear patterns identified suggest that there is a logic to Russian behavior, and that this limits the number of other potential circumstances that might lead to another military intervention.\* We should look for cases where the stakes are high for Russia, and Moscow is seeking to prevent a perceived geopolitical loss. The operational environment should allow for avoiding a direct clash with the U.S. military. Outside of the near abroad, it is difficult to think of circumstances that meet these criteria at the moment. However, a regional crisis in the Middle East or Eastern Europe could easily create those circumstances in the future. In any case, before force is used we are likely to see Moscow try and fail to get what it

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\* Small counterterrorism operations abroad are not considered here since these have been going on in limited ways for many years.

wants using other means. Preventative diplomacy might help stop this escalation before Russia falls back on the military tool.

On the other hand, the logic of Russia's actions suggests the potential for unintended Russia-NATO conflict is high and likely to grow. We are in the midst of a coercive bargaining process between Russia and NATO in the Baltic region. Russia's compellence efforts so far have not worked, and have already produced resistance, not compliance: NATO responded to Russia's brinksmanship by increasing rotational deployments, boosting the Baltic air policing mission, and so on. In addition to the brinksmanship moves, Russia has already started increasing manpower and building new infrastructure in the Western Military District. If the logic identified here holds, we should expect further efforts to compel a change in NATO's behavior.



# The Need to Massage Egos

## STATUS POLITICS AS A CRUCIAL ELEMENT OF US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 445

October 2016

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Despite multiple official declarations of non-adversarial intentions issued by the United States and Russia over the past quarter-century, both sides have been unable to avoid repeated bouts of conflict escalation. This “unnecessary rivalry” can be explained in part as a “status dilemma”—a concept modeled on the better-known notion of “security dilemma.”

In the groundbreaking volume [\*Status in World Politics\*](#) (T.V. Paul et al., 2014), status is defined as “collective beliefs about a given state’s ranking on valued attributes,” such as “wealth, coercive capabilities, culture, [or] demographic position.” Status is assumed to consist of two main components: “honor” and “authority.” The former derives from symbolic recognition of a given state’s place in a certain hierarchy, while the latter is the commonly accepted right of that state to use its power or have a say on a range of issues that arguably affect its interests.

A status dilemma is a situation in which an actor is seeking status upgrades that other actors could concede at an acceptable cost to their security, but instead—because of the uncertainty surrounding the status-seeker’s intentions—these other actors develop unnecessary fears of an attack being prepared against them and begin responding. Failure to recognize the status dilemma can lead to material consequences, such as heightened tensions, arms races, or even open conflict. Indeed, unresolved status dilemmas, that is, unwillingness of the sides to confer authority or honor on each other, have led to the growing rivalry between Russia and the United States over the last quarter-century. At the same time, opportunities exist for a virtually cost-free accommodation of mutual status

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aspirations; this, in turn, could open up new avenues for cooperation between the two sides.

### **The Quest for Status in US-Russia Relations**

The author of the status dilemma concept [used it](#) to account for the spike in U.S.-Soviet tensions that occurred in early 1980s. In subsequent decades, status aspirations have remained a key driver of Russia's policy toward the United States. Moscow has been looking for both symbolic recognition of a "great power plus" status and, more importantly, agreement by the Western powers to accept as legitimate and accommodate Russia's statements of interest on a broad range of international issues relevant to Moscow.

Russia's demands for "honor" and concurrent emotions have included:

- expressions of gratitude to Moscow by the West for agreeing to end the Cold War;
- abstention by the West from raising legitimacy issues about various aspects of Russian politics;
- symbolic trappings of an "equal partnership," such as high-profile bilateral meetings between top Russian and U.S. leaders; and
- "alliance jealousy" – attempts to [outbid NATO](#) and the EU in attracting members to Russian-led blocs.

For the last point above, "alliance jealousy," the discussion between Russia and the West about NATO's alleged non-expansion pledge (whether [issued](#) or [not](#)) is driven by status politics. From today's perspective, the eventual accession of all Warsaw Pact countries to NATO paints Russia as the loser in the Cold War—a snub to Gorbachev and his successors who sought the status of co-victors in the Cold War or, at least, co-beneficiaries of its termination.

A country usually seeks "honor" to satisfy the need of its leaders to identify with their referent counterparts in other states (usually the world's most powerful). In addition, a leader may value symbols of respect or other special treatment by foreign counterparts because these symbolic acts can easily be leveraged to raise the leader's domestic political profile. It has been [argued](#) that the inability or unwillingness of the West to give enough "honor" to Russia usually instigates

Moscow's frustration, and even fear of material reprisals being (covertly) prepared against the aspiring actor.

However, unmet honor aspirations alone cannot fully account for conflicts of status. Symbolism in status politics [lacks the power](#) to trigger a serious clash. Honor only becomes relevant to the parties involved when bigger issues are at stake, such as the shaping of the broad normative framework of international governance or mutual recognition of great powers' spheres of influence.

This has been the case in U.S.-Russian relations. Moscow's grievances usually surged when the United States and its allies were "adding injury to insult," that is, deploying capabilities or developing doctrines that the Kremlin perceived as material threats. In both the early 1980s and 2000s, these were the U.S. missile defenses (which threaten to diminish the status-endowing role of Russia's nuclear weapons) and capabilities suitable for prompt decapitation of the adversary, such as intermediate-range missiles in Europe or conventional high-precision long-range missiles. Later, Moscow's fears were stirred up by solidarism doctrines (applied by the West in the former Yugoslavia) and regime change policies (tested in Iraq and Libya and contemplated, the Russian government is convinced, toward Syria and even Russia itself).

For its part, Washington has been seeking Moscow's recognition of the United States' status as a "democracy guru" and a security provider to the smaller powers. Moscow's efforts to [deny](#) those roles to the United States have added acrimony to the bilateral relationship and reinforced suspicions about mutual intentions.

### **Breaking Out of the Status Dilemma?**

Regardless of the difficulties of obtaining status satisfaction, some authors in *Status in World Politics* have suggested that aspiring nations can sometimes be granted status accommodation by the leading powers without the security of the latter being undermined, the foundations of the international legal order shattered, or the core hierarchy significantly changed. According to that logic, in order to break out of their status dilemma, the United States and Russia would be advised to look for ways of such accommodation short of compromising their security.

Russia's role in its neighborhood and nuclear arms control stand out as the two tracks in the U.S.-Russian relationship that are richest in status-elevating opportunities for Moscow. However, reassuring Russia of its privileged rights in the post-Soviet neighborhood or forswearing missile defenses has proven difficult for the United States without undermining the credibility of NATO or compromising the idea of progress in defense technology.

Two other potentially fruitful areas for status signaling between Russia and the United States are cyberspace and the Arctic. In cyberspace, simply by negotiating with Russia, Washington could acknowledge Moscow's comparable capabilities in the cyber domain. It would not be politically difficult for the U.S. government to engage Russia in this sphere. However, the lack of basic trust, undermined by controversies such as the release of the hacked Democratic National Committee emails in July 2016, presents a serious obstacle. So far, Moscow and Washington have only signed one agreement covering cyberspace terminology (2013) and endorsed a consensus report prepared by the United Nations Group of Government Experts in ICT (2015). While important, these documents fall short of placing Russia on an equal footing with the United States as a shaper of the norms of behavior in cyberspace.

As a circumpolar nation on par with the United States, Russia can claim an equal status when negotiating Arctic issues. Before the sanctions regime set in, Moscow was presenting the Arctic as a key region where synergies were being achieved by matching Russia's natural resources with advanced Western technology—a variation of the “grand bargain” that Russia has been seeking with the West. However, the problem with receiving status signals from the United States on the Arctic is that Washington is reluctant to acknowledge the importance of Arctic politics as such and therefore to engage in it actively.

In its turn, by militantly refusing to acknowledge the role of the United States as an authority on democratization and market reform, Moscow may be losing an opportunity to accommodate U.S. status concerns. [Acknowledging](#) the United States as the sole superpower and a “force for good” in international politics would hardly turn away any of Moscow's significant partners and it could help it win many more of them. The importance Washington attaches to the acceptance of these signs of status by other powers was demonstrated by the outsize [media coverage](#) and response to President Vladimir Putin's seemingly low-profile statement recognizing the United States as the sole superpower in his speech at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2016.

In fact, a number of “honor” signals between the sides allowed them to build trust and engage in cooperation on key security and economic issues. Former president George W. Bush’s positive assessment of Putin as a leader in June 2001 no doubt facilitated the decision of the latter to help the former in his anti-Taliban campaign in Afghanistan. The symbolism of the “reset” policy announced by Washington in March 2009 generated a strong momentum for U.S.-Russian arms control negotiations and cooperation in curbing Iran’s nuclear program.

### **Challenges to Status Accommodation**

Despite the presence of status reassurance opportunities, the obstacles to making full use of them are significant. Analogies drawn between the traditional security dilemma and the status dilemma do not extend to ways of overcoming the two types of dilemmas. The status dilemma is easier to resolve because opportunities are usually available to block the demands of a status-concerned state without engaging in material escalation in the form of an arms race or brinkmanship behavior.

Russia’s quest to raise its status vis-a-vis the United States has been met with a number of challenges. First, in order to compel its counterparts to recognize Moscow’s status, the Kremlin has often had to undertake risky policy maneuvering. For example, Moscow sought a “strategic alliance” with China, and launched a military campaign in Syria to defeat President Bashar al-Assad’s enemies to a significant extent in order to beef up Russia’s profile in the eyes of the West. These are not classical balancing acts because the United States was not directly challenged by either of these Russian moves. Russia was trying to show that it was an indispensable actor in areas of interest to the United States and that Moscow has strategic options other than alignment with Washington (and its allies). However, once Moscow’s partners—China, Syria, and Iran—understood that Russia’s aspirations were status-focused, they began to question Russia’s commitment to their shared goals. Beijing, Tehran, and Damascus all balked at Russia’s attempts to harness them in pursuit of the Kremlin’s own agendas. China is clearly not interested in precipitating a showdown with the United States over their manifold contradictions and does not rule out an eventual mutually-beneficial compromise. Iran made a public case in August 2016 of denying the Russian Air Force permanent basing rights on Iranian territory despite Moscow’s earlier announcement that an agreement to that effect had been reached. In his turn, Assad implicated Russia in an aerial campaign to bomb

eastern Aleppo in October 2016, a move that led to a major conflagration between Russia and the West (costing, at the very least, the extension of U.S./EU sanctions on Russia beyond January 2017).

Second, it turned out to be easy for Russia's rivals to inflict a substantial amount of pain on Kremlin policymakers by simply ignoring Moscow. As long as negotiation with an aspiring nation is usually seen as a status-conferring signal, refusing to engage in negotiation works as a status-diminishing signal. Such blackballing tactics proved to be almost cost-free, but effective in exerting psychological pressure and pushing Moscow toward costly, risky, and at times erratic maneuvers.

Third, even when Russia's counterparts have been willing to accommodate its status demands to a certain extent, Moscow has usually found it difficult (or unnecessary) to signal the scope of its status aspirations. These aspirations could range from symbolic and moderate (bilateral negotiations and handshakes) to authority-based and virtually limitless (recognized right to have a say on every problem of significance). Uncertainty generates strong balancing behavior vis-a-vis the state that seeks an elevated status because its counterparts become concerned that, under the guise of status pursuit, Moscow could obtain clout incommensurate to its actual resources and responsibility. For example, one of the key goals of Moscow's Syria campaign has been to elevate Russia's global status by presenting it as a diligent great power committed to eradicating the Islamic State. However, the U.S.-led coalition has remained reluctant to confer that status on Russia by cooperating with Moscow in Syria because the coalition feared that what Russia actually was to harness coalition forces into eradicating all rivals to the Assad government that would then become Moscow's dedicated client in the Middle East.

Fourth, breaking the rules is a powerful means of a quick elevation of status under an acute "status thirst." Russia has regarded as a major sign of high status the [ability to break the rules](#) that it dislikes (and introduce its own rules and norms). However, rule-breaking behavior triggers a stronger negative response than rule generation. Russia is finding it difficult to achieve "status upgrades" by building new normative structures—for example, in governance of outer space or cyberspace. When Russia went the way of a rule-challenger vis-a-vis the Ukraine conflict, it triggered stronger resistance from the West than it expected.

Finally, the quest for “honor,” which is typical of Russia’s status aspirations, can sometimes adversely affect other aspects of status. For example, membership in a prestigious international organization raises a country’s status, but the need to observe the corresponding norms limits that country’s freedom of action. If entry into clubs is pursued by an actor with a view to elevating its status, that actor will need to assess the balance between membership and the ensuing normative constraints.

Characteristically, Russia seemed to be prepared for expulsion from a number of clubs as it was embarking on a risky course of action toward Ukraine in 2014. Moscow valued assertion of its “right” to break the rules as a sign of status more than membership in the G8 or in the Council of Europe—mostly because the Kremlin felt that the prestige-to-constraint balance was unfavorable for Russia in those Western-dominated institutions. At the same time, Russia attached disproportionate value to participation in other institutions that do not entail many constraints but which can contribute to national self-esteem. Take, for example, the Rio Olympics, where Moscow took the banning of many Russian athletes with more pain and resentment than Russia’s expulsion from the G8 in 2014.

## **Conclusion**

Status aspirations play a significant role in U.S.-Russia relations. They may even play a bigger role in generating the persistent rivalry between the two nations than do traditional security considerations. Mutual status accommodation by both sides, while hypothetically possible, has been difficult even in areas where it could occur without damaging either of their material interests. Each side has generally preferred to block each other’s status aspirations, at times pushing each other toward risky behavior, which can lead to a serious escalation of tensions and even an armed conflict.



# Russia's "Sovereign Globalization"

## INSULATION, INFLUENCE, AND DECLINE

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 434

July 2016

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Economic problems are once again at the center of debates about Russia's future. For the first time under the Putin presidency, the country faces a protracted decline in living standards. This will have important implications for domestic cohesion, and perhaps for the capacity to sustain a strongly assertive foreign policy. One important cause of these problems is Russia's distinctive, ambitious, but failed strategy of globalization. The legacies of this failure can help us to understand the difficult choices that Russia now faces.

When Vladimir Putin became president, he demonstrated a strikingly positive attitude toward engagement with the global economy. He was explicit and consistent in his view that a strong Russia had to be prosperous, and that prosperity could not be achieved without deeper international economic integration. Unlike other aspects of the Soviet experience, he showed no nostalgia for autarky and isolation.

But there was an inherent tension between enthusiasm for globalization and the *silovik* project of re-establishing political control through a strong authoritarian state. Building a "vertical of power" meant limiting unwelcome external influences, weakening independent institutions, and harnessing legal powers for political ends. By contrast, integration into the global economy meant easing control of commercial and financial flows across borders, increasing Russia's dependence on external actors, and binding Russian entities to contracts and jurisdictions beyond Russia's control. These two priorities pulled in different directions. To manage this tension, Russia developed a strategy, which we may call "sovereign globalization." Just as sovereign democracy sought to manage domestic political processes to strengthen regime legitimacy and control, so sovereign globalization sought to manage international market processes to strengthen Russia's economy and extend Russian influence abroad.

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The rise and fall of sovereign globalization has shaped the evolution of the Putin project. We can trace three phases: insulation, influence, and decline. Their passing marks the failure of Russia's ambitious attempt to harness economic integration to great-power politics. This failure leaves Russia with a series of less attractive foreign-policy strategies among which it has yet to make a clear choice.

### **Insulation**

During his first term, President Putin expressed strong commitment to restoring Russia's economic strength through international integration. As he [stated](#) in his 2003 annual address to parliament:

"Russia owes its economic growth above all to the favorable world economic situation over recent years... No country today, no matter how big and how wealthy, can develop successfully in isolation from the rest of the world. On the contrary, the biggest success comes to those countries that consciously use their energy and intelligence to integrate themselves into the world economy."

Numerous Russian policy measures supported this. They included: encouraging foreign direct investment, completing the liberalization of ruble convertibility, lifting restrictions on foreign ownership of Gazprom shares, and reviving Russia's World Trade Organization (WTO) bid.

With significant domestic reforms stalling in 2003, foreign economic relations became the main driver of growth. Every strand of these thickened significantly. From 2000-08, inward investment rose 28-fold and outward investment six-fold. In 2002, Russia joined the G8, and chaired it in 2006. The same year, Russia recorded its first net capital inflow of the post-Soviet era.

At the same time, flows of goods, services, and capital were carefully managed to ensure they did not bring Western influences that might undermine the rebuilding of a strong and autonomous Russian state. In particular, restrictions were tightened on foreign asset ownership in a wide range of strategic industries. The Yukos affair signaled, among other things, the Kremlin's determination to head off potential foreign control of Russia's largest private company, while Russia also regained majority control of major Western-led energy projects. The only exception to this pattern of deepening international exposure was Russia's foreign indebtedness. But here, too, Russian policy served the goal of protecting the country from unwelcome foreign influence. Putin made early sovereign debt repayment a priority in order to end what he saw as a humiliating dependence on international lenders and to eliminate the potential for exerting leverage on Russia.

These methods appeared highly effective in insulating domestic political control from the beneficial effects of external economic engagement. From 2000-12 Russia enjoyed inflows of over \$1 trillion, helping to drive GDP growth rates of 7 percent per annum.\* At the same time, the state became stronger, more authoritarian, and more assertive, while Western business partners became more exposed to Russia but less influential in it.

## **Influence**

This success emboldened Russia to develop a second, more ambitious, strand to sovereign globalization. Russia now aimed not merely to limit external influence but to exert its own influence on others through stronger economic ties. Russia had done this episodically within the post-Soviet region in the 1990s, but from the early Putin era, Moscow began to use economic means for foreign policy ends far more systematically. It did so in two ways.

First, Russia used its position as a major market for, and energy supplier to, the post-Soviet states to link imports of produce, and exports of oil and gas, to unrelated political issues. Actions and policies unwelcome to Moscow were thereby punished through costly disruption of the target state's trade.

Second, Russia sought to use its growing role as a dominant gas supplier to Europe to exert a more gradual form of political influence that we may call "energy Finlandization." Russia sought to deepen its presence across the European energy value chain and so cultivate perceptions of individual, elite, and national interests as naturally aligned with a Russian point of view. Unlike Russia's use of economic means within the post-Soviet region, this more subtle and longer-term approach favored co-option more than coercion, inducements more than threats, and persuasion more than punishment—although a more coercive intent could surface when these softer methods were challenged. Russia repeatedly divided EU states, hindered an effective common European policy, and began to entrench elements of a dominant presence: bilateral over multilateral relations, long-term contracts, and downstream asset purchases. As a result, the Russia-EU economic relationship flourished even as political relations deteriorated. Russia even aspired to turn Moscow into a major financial center and the ruble into a reserve currency.

Over Putin's first two presidential terms, this strategy appeared to work effectively. Sovereign globalization could, it seemed, manage the tensions and harness the synergies of international openness and domestic control. This strategy also marked a historic departure for Russia, whose enduring weakness had always been its relative economic

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<sup>2</sup> Total oil and gas windfall revenues alone for 2000-08 were \$900 billion. See: Alexei Kudrin and Evsey Gurvich, "[A new growth model for the Russian economy](#)," *BOFIT Policy Brief* 1/2015, p. 5.

backwardness as a great power. For the first time, it now sought to use economic relations with wealthier states as a source of strength.

## **Decline**

Moscow's apparent success, however, was dependent on a set of favorable but temporary circumstances. After 2008, three adverse shifts in Russia's relationship with the global economy undermined its strategy. First, the raw material export-led growth model began to fail, with growth rates falling even while commodity prices remained high. As a consequence, prosperity could no longer be achieved primarily from external sources. Second, the "[revolution in energy affairs](#)"—shale gas and the expansion of global liquefied natural gas trade—threatened Gazprom's model of securing a dominant presence in Europe through long-term bilateral supply contracts. Third, EU concerns over the implications of energy dependence on Russia sparked a more cohesive and assertive policy. This was prompted above all by the downstream effects on European consumers of Russia's gas supply cuts to Ukraine. Russia was unable to insulate its coercion of post-Soviet states from its cultivation of the West. In response, the EU hastened its efforts to diversify suppliers and routes and to challenge Gazprom's restrictive and monopolistic practices.

As a consequence, Putin now began to see globalization as a source of threats as well as opportunities. Its effects on domestic cohesion came under scrutiny, especially on the loyalties of business and administrative elites with their assets, tastes, and sometimes families, in the West. Influential Russian commentators [coined](#) the term "sixth column" to describe those who, outwardly loyal to the regime, urged moderation in Russia's policy toward the West because of their own vested interests in this relationship. A "de-offshorization" campaign was mounted in response, with measures that included a decree banning government officials from holding overseas financial assets.

Patterns of international engagement, too, became more defensive. Russia's ambition to extend energy influence across Europe gave way to a narrower focus on tighter integration within the post-Soviet region in order to consolidate Russia's position—in part, as a response to what Russia saw as expansion of the EU's own influence through its Eastern Partnership. Russian pressure on Ukraine to turn toward the Eurasian Economic Union instead of signing an EU Association Agreement became the proximate cause of the present crisis in Russian-Western relations.

This crisis led to the unravelling of Russia's economic relationship with the West as the two sides imposed sanctions on one another. This marked the first time in the post-Soviet era that the West sought to restrict rather than encourage Russia's integration into the global economy, and the first time that Russia raised rather than lowered barriers to its own participation in it. It marks, too, the failure of sovereign globalization, Russia's

ambitious attempt to reconcile competing imperatives of international integration and domestic control, globalization and *Realpolitik*, power and plenty.

## Implications

What choices now face Russia? Four options are available, each offering a different way of addressing the central tension between economic prosperity through international openness and political control through a *silovik* state.

1. Status quo ante. This approach seeks not to resolve the contradictions of current policy but to ease the conditions that aggravate them in order to make the present course more tolerable. It seeks to remove Western sanctions (for example, by making Russia indispensable to a resolution of the Syrian conflict) and by attempting to shore up oil prices through closer cooperation with OPEC.

This is a policy of "muddling" rather than "muddling through." Even if Russia succeeds in achieving the measures dictated by this approach (such as lifting Western sanctions), this will not resolve Russia's underlying economic problems. The country's growth model was failing even before the collapse in oil price and imposition of sanctions. This path is not a long-term solution to the challenges facing Russia's political economy.

2. Self-sufficiency. This approach prioritizes domestic control and great-power assertiveness over prosperity through globalization. Economically, it involves import substitution, "patriotic" retrenchment, and even anathematization of some Western products, for example by their public destruction. Politically, it means raising pressure on, and issuing threats against, domestic opposition.

It is unclear how sustainable this course might be. The Russian economy remains highly dependent on international factors, especially the oil price. Russian economists continue to warn against the inefficiencies of import substitution. Further economic decline could trigger mass discontent and resentment at elite corruption.\*

3. Non-Western integration. This approach seeks to compensate for decline in relations with the West and the effects of sanctions by building new political alliances and economic partnerships—in particular in Asia and especially with China. With fewer political differences or military tensions with these states than with the West, Russia seeks international support, or at least "understanding," for its policies as well as trade and investment.

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<sup>3</sup> For a recent argument warning of this and other problems, see Alexander J. Motyl, "[Lights Out for the Putin Regime](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, January 27, 2016.

The economic potential of Russia's "Asian pivot" is unclear. While most Asian states will seek to avoid choosing between Russia and the West, few are likely to support Russia if circumstances force them to make such a choice. Nor are economic relations with non-Western states likely to be an effective substitute for the large flows of Western trade and investment on which Russia has depended. China has already demonstrated a tough pragmatism with Russia, for example on gas pricing. Its "One Belt, One Road" policy will deepen its involvement in Central Asia and could generate economic rivalry and political friction with Russia.

4. International integration. This is the opposite of the "self-sufficiency" option discussed above. It prioritizes collective economic welfare over the domestic *silovik* agenda. In this scenario, foreign economic policy is guided only by prospective welfare gains from international integration—perhaps accompanied by significant structural reforms to make Russia a more attractive partner and allow it to benefit more fully from international trade and investment. Crucially, Russia's economic relations would no longer be used as an instrument of external political influence. Since this describes the policy of most other states, Russia in this scenario becomes a "normal" country rather than one with a special identity or mission.

This policy would require a fundamental departure from Russia's current strategy and outlook, in effect, an abandonment of the principles and practices of sovereign globalization. It is unclear, to say the least, how politically feasible this would be under the current regime.

Since 2014, Russian policy has combined elements of all these approaches except the last. Russia's extension of import sanctions on Turkey has shown continued willingness to use economic relations for political ends; it is actively supporting import substitution; and it is courting investment and trade with a host of Asian states.

Russia is still searching for a coherent response to the failure of sovereign globalization without renouncing the principles on which it is based. The new policy that emerges will shape the prospects of both Russia's domestic development and its relations with the West.

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For a more detailed argument, see Nigel Gould-Davies, "[Russia's Sovereign Globalization Rise, Fall and Future](#)," Chatham House Research Paper, January 2016.

# Is There A Non-West for Russia to Lead?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 417

January 2016

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Recently, Russian policymakers and strategists have articulated a vision of a vibrant non-Western world, one in which the United States and European leaders are increasingly marginal and where Russia plays a leading role. In official statements, presidential speeches, and in presentations by government officials, Russian officialdom has presented the case that this non-Western world is vital and growing.<sup>†</sup> In official telling, the global market share of the United States and Europe is in decline, while the rising powers of Eurasia, India, and China are bearing with them an alternative economy, security and shared moral order that rejects the values of the current leadership in Europe and the United States. In some accounts, this non-Western world has an alternative set of conservative values, in many ways in keeping with the social and political norms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: a time when the boundaries between men and women were clear, when great powers negotiated soberly with one another to sustain order within and between their states, when grand geopolitical bargains and spheres of influence were the substance of international diplomacy, and nationalism and the national interest were seen as legitimate grounds for changing borders and using military force.

This vision has largely been greeted with either derision or alarm in Western capitals, but it is important to assess its viability. Is there a viable Russian vision of an alternative to economic liberalism and a military-political world in which the US and Europe play a dominant role? And is there a non-Western world emerging in which Russia might play a leading role?

## **An Economic Non-West?**

In the economic sphere, the short answer to these questions is “no,” or at least, “not yet.” There is no emergence of a non-Western economic alternative, in the way that Communism and planned economies presented an alternative to Western liberalism during the Cold War. It is true that the share of global GDP generated by the United

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<sup>†</sup> For an example of non-official statements to this effect, see Dmitry Trenin, “[Russia Far from Isolated in Non-West Community](#),” *China Daily*, July 8, 2015.

States and Europe is declining and that of the BRICS—particularly China—is rising. But to grow, non-Western countries have had to emulate and incorporate what were once Western institutions, providing the equivalent of property rights, common standards of quality and production, and more transparent accounting in order to gain investment and trade. Growth has largely come—and continues to come—through ties of trade and investment with the United States and Europe. The growing sectors of the Chinese economy—for example, the parts that produce iPhones and other quality consumer goods for both domestic consumption and export—are those that have assimilated into this economic system. China and India are growing because for the past two decades they have economically become a part of “the West.”

To the extent that there is a non-West in the world economy, it is impoverished, sanctioned, natural-resource-based, or otherwise hamstrung or limited in its potential. It is not a club that is growing. Brazil, India, and China are increasingly lapsed members. Russia may increasingly be considered a member of this unfortunate club. At least in the economic realm, Russia is not leading. It is self-isolating.

Although sanctions and Russian military actions in Ukraine played a role in this isolation, the main damage has been done by the Russian state, which creates a business climate that risk-averse capital avoids. Russia, in contrast to much of Asia, has assimilated in a much more limited way to the norms and demands of the international economy. Property rights, particularly for foreign investors who do not enjoy the privilege of membership in elite political networks, are too tenuous to secure much investment. Russia continues to generate human capital, but much of it migrates to countries where it can enjoy the fruits of its innovation and effort without predation by a corrupt state. As a result, the economy is heavily dependent on the export of raw materials, particularly oil and gas, which have fewer institutional requirements to achieve growth. The Russian economy, as well as the federal budget, rises and falls with commodity prices. Russia’s core political-economic model—where control of assets is contingent on political loyalty and connections—necessarily limits its economic capacity and degree of integration.

The strategy of cultivating Russia’s place in the “non-West” appears to rest on a flawed underlying theory that economic ties are like military ties and alliances; that economic relations follow directly from intergovernmental agreements rather than being the product of the decisions of millions of individuals who need to be enticed into economic exchange. Where this is true—for example with nuclear energy or military production—Russian strategy is often successful in establishing ties. But state-to-state contracts or politically-driven contracts between state-controlled enterprises constitute a relatively limited share of international economic relations.

Expressions of solidarity of the “non-West”—in annual meetings of the BRICS, or the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank—do not translate into trade and



investment. Trade as a percentage of GDP is quite high among the BRICS, but much of that trade is with Europe and the United States. China's largest trading partner is the United States, with \$521 billion in total trade in 2013; Russia is tenth, with \$89 billion in trade. The United States, with \$61 billion in trade volume, is India's third largest trade partner and the European Union as a whole has \$82 billion in trade with India. Indo-Russian trade was a mere \$10 billion in 2013, when Russia was India's 18<sup>th</sup> largest trade partner.

The belief that intergovernmental agreements with China and investment from the countries of the non-West are going to compensate for the absence of financial and trade ties with Europe and the United States is already proving unrealistic. Despite a host of deals and public displays of affection between the leadership of the two countries, in the first half of 2015 trade between China and Russia fell by 31 percent, and Chinese investment to Russia [dropped](#) by 20 percent.

Now and into the future, it is unlikely that the Chinese investor will behave in a way quite different from the European or American; they will like to see returns. Chinese consumers are not going to show a preference for Russian products that are not competitive in price or quality. To gain access to markets in China, India, and the rest of Asia, Russia will have to implement most of the reforms that would be necessary to gain access to European and American markets. Its current political-economic model will not "pivot" well to a competitive Asia that has long since successfully pivoted toward "the West."

### **A Non-Western Military Bloc?**

Given its military capability and its vote on the UN Security Council, Russia is somewhat better situated to play a leadership role in security affairs. To the extent that wealth can be converted into military power, there is also an increase in the relative power of non-Western states. The military investment of China, Russia, Iran, and other non-Western powers has grown considerably in the past decade. Is it not possible for Russia to lead a bloc of emerging powers to balance the United States and NATO in international affairs?

Perhaps, but it does not seem likely. The rise of an alternative, anti-Western bloc depends not only on dissatisfaction with U.S. and European policies but also on the degree to which Russia, China, or other powers are seen as superior partners. Public opinion and elite opinion do not necessarily overlap, but if we take the Pew Global Attitudes [surveys](#) as our guide, there are few countries of the world with an unfavorable attitude toward the United States and few countries with a favorable attitude toward Russia. Of all 39 countries surveyed, only Vietnam (75%), China (51%), and Ghana (56%) have a majority that views Russia favorably. Of these, only in China is Russia viewed more favorably than the United States. With the exception of China, Russia's strategic



partners are those states that are not in a position to choose a close relationship with the West—e.g. Iran. Moreover, Russian actions seem to be isolating it from other countries and potential allies rather than mobilizing support.

Nonetheless, there is in key regions of Asia and the Middle East growing frustration with U.S. policy and potential support for anti-American revisionism. These sentiments may cohere in a way that provides an alternative to the West if local conflicts are mismanaged or if the United States is perceived as interfering in the domestic affairs of these other states or, especially, as trying to use international institutions and integration to extend U. S. political influence into the internal politics of other countries. Continued American/European liberal interventionism—including not only military force, but the imposition of an expanded framework for individual rights (including transgender rights), the frequent use of boycotts and sanctions, the use of U.S. courts to try foreign citizens under U.S. law, and a general disregard of legitimate interests not framed in international legal terms—is likely to breed a more robust alternative and lead to the defection of potential allies. But with U. S. restraint and relatively minor accommodation of the interests of key regional powers and allies (like Israel, Egypt, Singapore, the Philippines, and Indonesia), there will be no robust non-Western alternative world order for Russia, China, or other great powers to lead.

### **Whither Russia?**

The success of the Russian strategy to cultivate a leadership in the “non-West” depends on other states buying into an alternative set of economic and political institutions that does not include the United States and Europe. That is unlikely if the United States does not use international institutions to intervene deeply in the internal affairs of other states. The perceived possibility in Russia of a non-West rests almost entirely on its recent rapprochement with China, and the success of such a Russian strategy certainly hinges entirely on China’s choices and future development. Current trajectories suggest that China is unlikely to cut itself off from the United States and Europe. And if China continues to pursue deeper integration into the world economy, and to pursue a global leadership role rather than carve out a separate non-Western world in which it can play the role of leader, then Russian ambitions for turning away from the West will simply lead to its isolation.

The likely failure of Russia’s “non-Western” strategy is not grounds for optimism. An isolated and uncomprehending Russian government is potentially as dangerous as one that plays a powerful leading role in world affairs, and less predictable. An ongoing strategic dialogue about Russia’s legitimate place in the world and its legitimate interests would most likely increase stability. Meanwhile, shoring up potential entrants into the non-West—in particular, China—with a higher level of engagement would ensure that the core principles of the existing order are sustained.

# The Russian World, Post-Truth, and Europe

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 477

June 2017

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In the not so distant past, a large segment of scholarship concentrated on the possibility of institutional and normative cooperation between Europe and Russia. In a drastic shift, many academics are now analyzing Russia's narrative techniques and their impact on EU member state political agendas. Central to the Kremlin's efforts is the Russian World concept. It is a complex umbrella term encompassing a variety of information and communication elements. The concept has an ideological doctrine but it is increasingly a set of manipulative measures meant to influence foreign polities with the aim of securing a strategy for Russia's reentry to Europe. The Russian World holds a primordial role in Russian foreign policy, particularly since the Russia-Ukraine conflict began in 2014. Even though much can be said about the concept in relation to that crisis, the focus in this memo is on the latest iteration of the Russian World and its interchanges on Europe.

## Russian Messages and Movements

Russia uses the immigration debate in the EU for depicting all of Europe as being unable to protect its identity, and for presenting Russia itself as a protector of traditional (meaning Christian) values. Russian information campaigns during the peak of the refugee crisis were marked by a highly securitized narrative of taking care of "our people" who are threatened by assorted rapists, terrorists, aliens, and other miscreants. The idea of protecting "compatriots" is an inherent element of the concept. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the leather-clad motorcyclists of the Night Wolves club are examples of Russian World multiple identities, with both considering and portraying themselves as Orthodox "true believers."

The ROC and the Russian government have worked to retrieve or revive Orthodox properties in various European countries. As an example of the nascence of the concept, the Russian government, on behalf of the ROC, retook possession of the Orthodox Church in Nice in 2011. This was shared by the Russian media as an important, meaningful, and symbolic event in a country (France) that has a large Russian diaspora and which holds great weight in Europe.

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Another popularized event of the Russian World reaching Europe was the historical meeting between ROC Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis in Havana in 2016. The location alone has geopolitical soft power undertones. The wording of the joint declaration was in line with both Kremlin-patronized discourses and that of the Vatican. For example, there was a strong emphasis on protecting conservative values and mentions of the “conflict in Ukraine” rather than the “Russia-Ukraine conflict.”

The Night Wolves motorcycle club, a direct recipient of Kremlin “NGO” funds led by a character nicknamed *Khirurg* (“The Surgeon”), has performed a variety of flamboyant, patriotic activities in Russia, Crimea, and Europe. In 2015 and 2016, the Night Wolves attempted high-profile, provocative biker tours from Russia to Berlin on World War II Victory Day. Apart from participating in commemorative celebrations, the club offered loud, full support for the annexation of Crimea and stated that they were more than willing to take “protective measures” against the “neo-Nazi coup in Kyiv.” These types of activities hope to have resonance both abroad and at home. The Kremlin is adept at using “a picture to speak a thousand words” to rally the populace around leadership policies.

Russian think tanks in Europe are another wing of Russian World output. One example is the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation (IDC) in Paris funded by Moscow and run by Natalia Narochnitskaya, a Russian historian with a religious and nationalistic background. This Institute, which has the same name as an organization based in New York, actively advocated for the “exit” option during the Brexit debates. The [homepage](#) of its website at the time of this writing features its only other staff member, John Laughland, discussing the French elections on *Russia Today* saying, “I personally support an anti-globalization and pro-sovereignty message.” This illustrates the link between Russian World supporters and anti-EU activists.

Another Russia-funded organization, the Berlin-based Dialogue of Civilizations (DOC) Research Institute, is endowed by Vladimir Yakunin, the former head of Russian Railways and a Russian tycoon. The name of this organization is a combination of mimicry to and political appropriation of the United Nations programming concept of “dialogue among civilizations.” An important part of DOC operations in Europe is the annual [Rhodes Forum](#). A front page [report](#) on the DOC website at the time of this writing begins with, “After Brexit and the victory of Donald Trump, the liberal world seems to lie in tatters: economic globalization is in retreat,” which attests to a peculiar blend of illiberal political platform and the articulation of Russia’s civilizational autonomy vis-à-vis the West.

There is also the Valdai Club, which is not a European-based think-tank, but has as one of its chief roles to intensely develop contacts with Western scholars who the Kremlin thinks may have some sympathies for the Kremlin. Regular Valdai attendees have

included such well known European speakers as the research director of the German-Russian Forum [Alexander Rahr](#), the former president of the Czech Republic [Vaclav Klaus](#), and Kent University professor [Richard Sakwa](#), among others. Some of them have publicly [argued](#) for a softer Western stance on Russia and claimed that Russia's role in Ukraine is more defensible than often thought in the West, which has become a matter of debate in international academic circles.

### **How do Russian World Policies Operate?**

The media play a critical role in Russian World policies. *Russia Today*, *Sputnik*, and Russian Internet organizations disseminate Kremlin viewpoints. They take aim at foreign political campaigns with half-truths and non-truths. Operatives in this field share incorrect information about peoples' backgrounds and affiliations (smear campaigns) as well as sensitive information that has been hacked. These organs are skillful at intermixing news and opinion, and often aim, at a minimum, to confuse the information space.

Russian World discourses are developed to resonate with foreign television and online target audiences. Messages cater mostly to the right, but also sometimes to the left. One way or another, the status quo—the establishment—is the adversary. Pro-nationalist messages have been played in step with some right-wing European parties. Refugee incidents in European countries with large conservative segments have been highlighted in ways that spark xenophobia, discontent, and anxiety. On the other side of the coin, some Spanish-language *Russia Today* broadcasts have sought to influence left-minded audiences in Spain and Latin America. For example, at times, programming has accented how Europeans are reluctant to take refugee grievances seriously and has lambasted new EU control and inspection measures.\*

Although some of Russia's strategies resonate, there are limitations and challenges. For example, IDC's open advocacy for Brexit added fuel to that debate, but it did not make the UK a better partner for Russia. In neither the Baltic nor Nordic countries did right-wing nationalists become "Putin understanders" despite information campaigns aimed at mobilizing conservative and nationalist constituencies there.

Germany has high influence in Europe so it makes sense for Russian agitators to focus on it. In Germany's recent election campaign, there was an emotional news incident at the height of the "refugee invasion" when a fake story was spread about the rape of a 13-year-old ethnic Russian girl. This sparked street demonstrations [demanding](#) security and questioning the efficiency of the government. In another, related, example, the tiny German pro-Kremlin *Einheit* party launched an out-sized media campaign to resettle Russophones in Crimea. There were episodes when pro-Russian activists incited

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<sup>2</sup> I am thankful to Nicolas de Pedro from CIDOB, Barcelona, for drawing my attention to this.

Russian-Germans to vote in the parliamentary elections for the right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party. During those elections, *Russia Today* portrayed the government of Angela Merkel negatively and voiced positive support for Frauke Petry, the chairperson of AfD, who in February 2017 visited Moscow. There have been multiple cases of information attacks and negative information campaigns against German experts and diplomats. “Policy experts” with obscure reputations appear on Russian television shows in native languages trying to discredit mainstream reports and genuine experts. If new messages cannot be rooted, at least doubt can be fostered. Russian campaigns in Europe continue. Take, for example, President Vladimir Putin’s brazen hosting of French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen in March 2017, which was a clear gesture of diplomatic support. In the end, however, it was of no help when her far-right National Front lost to Emmanuel Macron and En Marche!

### Reactions in Europe

Reactions in Europe to Russian activities vary. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) [emphasized](#) “protecting individuals against liability for merely redistributing or promoting” any information and spoke out against “content filtering systems which are imposed by a government and which are not end-user controlled.” Another comment from the OSCE held that “general prohibitions on the dissemination of information based on vague and ambiguous ideas, including ‘false news’ or ‘non-objective information,’ are incompatible with international standards.”

Other international organizations have been taking the problem more seriously. NATO’s press secretary has been rebuffing fake news spread by Russia. One example was its swift counterstatement on the false “rape” by German soldiers in Lithuania. In Germany, *Die Zeit* has made it a point to reveal fake news stories originating from or reproduced by Russian outlets. One example concerned a false report about 1,000 immigrants lighting a church on fire in Dortmund. French Defense Minister Jean Yves Le Drian [warned](#) in February 2017 of “cyber destabilization” that might cause security concerns. According to the Czech Audit of National Security, the “influence of foreign powers” and “hybrid threats” are two of eleven major homeland security [threats](#). The Czech Interior Ministry created the Hybrid Threat Centre in Prague in 2016. A former UK Labour minister [argued](#) that some of the top-level decisions affecting security in Britain had been “compromised by Russian infiltration.” In Finland, officials [claimed](#) to have documented 20 disinformation campaigns against their country that have come directly from the Kremlin. In January 2016, the prime minister’s office enrolled 100 officials in a [program](#) across several levels of the Finnish government to identify and understand the spread of disinformation.

## Russia and the “Society of the Spectacle”

There is a connection between Russian World discourses and the post-truth/post-fact domain. Since 2014, and particularly since the election of Donald Trump, many scholars\* and journalists are exploring Moscow’s manipulations of the Western mediascape. The Kremlin has received political advantage from the post-fact/post-truth sphere and will continue to do so, particularly in countries that have laws protecting freedom of speech.

The concept of post-truth politics is grounded in the feeling that major normative Western political pillars are being lost, or should be abandoned. As *The New York Times* [wrote](#): “Facts hold a sacred place in Western liberal democracies.” Discussions about a post-truth society are significantly influenced by the philosophy of post-modernism, which claims that truth is relative and that each voice matters. The post-truth debate revolves around the idea of deconstructing (and ending) the era of prevalent narratives and it perceives positive/verifiable facts in social relations as untenable. In a post-modern vision, social, cultural, and political discourses are semantic constructs with unfixed and even arbitrary meanings. It sees politics as the struggle for filling “empty” signifiers with “appropriate” content that is contextual and situation-dependent.

Russian information policies are well adjusted to the post-truth environment. It places strong emphasis on new possibilities and favors political manipulation, brainwashing, affective language games, and misleading analogies (take, for example, Russian media narratives comparing South Ossetia to Kosovo). It intentionally refrains from discussing many actualities, for example the financial costs of the foreign policy actions of annexing Crimea or the Russian Syria campaign.

Since post-truth technologies are largely based on emotional reshaping of people’s minds, they mainly focus on “human life” issues. Of particular salience in this respect is the aforementioned immigration debate in Europe, which was significantly sharpened by the refugee crisis, which affected all EU member states. Russia, through its information campaigns, tried to place under question European ideas of tolerance and multiculturalism, which by the same token meant questioning the larger dialogue about cultures and civilizations.

The Russian post-truth concept is also connected to the ongoing debate about order and security (this was [touched on](#) at the 2017 Security Conference in Munich titled “Post-Truth, Post-West, Post-Order”). The mechanisms of securitization that many European countries face are embedded in many Russian manipulative information campaigns. This is a particular challenge to countries with sizeable ethnic minorities (Germany,

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the abstracts of the PONARS Eurasia workshop, “[Revisiting Research on Russian Media](#),” April 28-29, 2017.

Estonia, Latvia) that might easily be objects of internal and external propaganda and misinformation.

## Conclusion

The Russian World concept shares company with post-truth narratives and images. It has evolved to embody assertive actions that rebrand and embellish discourses in support of Kremlin needs. Its foreign manipulations range from biased coverage of events, taking sides in political controversies, intentional securitization of narratives, hacking, information warfare, and direct lies. Though the Kremlin stifles free-thinking at home, it takes full advantage of the fact that in Western democracies public opinion matters. It recognized that social media platforms are quick-sharing and connective, and therefore an advantageous tool for propaganda and divisiveness.

Why might this be the case? The answer is beyond the scope of this memo, but essentially, Russia is [weak](#) in becoming a post-industrial society. It lags behind many Western countries in e-governance, e-diplomacy, e-voting and other practical instruments of post-industrial democracy. Choice, efficiency, and transparency are not amiable to the longevity of the Russian leadership. They feel far more comfortable with the idea of "[society of the spectacle](#)," which puts a premium on imagery, performance, appearance, and storytelling that are resistant to hard reality and facts.

## **II. Russia's Military Doctrine and Practices**





# Russia's New Conventional Capability

## IMPLICATIONS FOR EURASIA AND BEYOND

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 472

April 2017

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In late 2015 and early 2016, Russia demonstrated in Syria that it had acquired long-range, precision-guided, conventional-strike capability, the use of which has implications far beyond military utility. Moscow's willingness to use this newly acquired class of military power in support of its foreign policy is a challenge both to the West's monopoly on global power projection, which it has held since the end of the Cold War, and to its state of denial about Russia's rearmament progress. Washington has difficult choices to make. Will it embark on a policy of confrontation or cooperation? Will it pursue arms control with Russia or an arms race? At this point, Russia's capabilities are not on par with the West's, but the closer Russia comes to acquiring full capability, the less inclined it will be to accommodate Western concerns.

### **Russia is Catching Up**

The wars in Vietnam (United States) and Afghanistan (Soviet Union) demonstrated the limitations of the use of traditional World War II-style conventional forces. Both conflicts produced unacceptably high levels of casualties and collateral damage, the durations were longer than expected, and both lacked decisive outcomes. Since then, for the first time in centuries, international affairs effectively lost a major part of its power component, or as Carl von Clausewitz would say: policy could no longer be continued by means of war. The "peaceful period" was short. The 1991 Gulf War demonstrated that high-precision, conventional weapons can get the job done with limited casualties and collateral damage. The West's advanced weapons were subsequently used on a number of occasions: Balkans in the mid-1990s, Kosovo in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001, Gulf War II in 2003, and Libya in 2011. However, as seen by Russia's long-range strikes into Syria, the near-monopoly on the "modern" use of force by the United States and its allies, which has endured for a quarter of century, is now ending.

The traditional condescension with which Russian efforts to create modern, long-range weapons have been traditionally treated in the West is understandable. Moscow has

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been talking about producing precision-guided, conventional-strike weapons since at least 2000 but kept missing deadlines. By 2013-14, Moscow finally showed its first tangible successes. One should have paid closer attention to a series of high-level meetings chaired by President Vladimir Putin at the end of 2013 when he talked about conventional deterrence—such policies are only made public when success is assured. By and large, the weapons that Moscow produced are similar to what the United States has had for more than twenty years. Although it is significant that Russia has mastered the relevant technologies, it is more significant that Russia has employed them in warfare.

At the present technological level of Russia's new weapons, geography favors Russia more than it does the United States, particularly when it comes to today's "hot spots," most of which are located in Eurasia and are thus closer to Russia than to the United States. In particular, Moscow can bring the weapons to bear faster and cheaper than Washington for several reasons:

- The United States usually needs several weeks to move platforms with modern strike assets to an area; therefore, its capability is not truly stand-off. Russia, in contrast, is closer to potential target zones, as its missile strikes in Syria demonstrated. It can launch modern missiles from inside its own territory or from within its own territorial waters. Therefore, its weapons have the edge in stand-off capability. Moscow continues to build up the Caspian flotilla of small surface ships and diesel-powered submarines in the Black Sea, both equipped with long-range submarine-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs); it is also launching a large series of SLCM-carrying frigates, which will expand its reach to waters around most of Eurasia.
- To acquire a truly stand-off global capability, the United States has to pursue costly and time-consuming programs, which feature, among other elements, a hypersonic cruise missile with global reach. While Russia has been working on a similar program, in most contingencies it could limit itself to shorter-range assets, which could be developed quickly and at a lower cost (recent reports indicate that it has successfully tested the 400-km range Tsiklon hypersonic cruise missile).
- The United States had to abandon plans to equip strategic missiles with conventional warheads because almost any launch against targets in Eurasia would have these missiles flying toward or over Russia and China. The risk of misidentifying a target was rightly judged as unacceptable. In contrast, Russian strategic weapons armed with conventional warheads could be directed away from the United States. Such considerations led Moscow to undertake, for example, a program to create a dual-capable, liquid fuel, intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) using existing technologies and leveraging decades of experience with designing and building similar assets.

Additionally, there are several important differences between Russia's emergent conventional arsenal and the capabilities and strategies of the United States, as follows:

- Following a long tradition, Russia continues to favor ground-launched missiles. In this category, they have the Iskandr with its declared 500-km range, which some estimate at 700 km or even more for the cruise missile version. They have plans to create a conventionally-capable ICBM (mentioned above). There are also reports about Russian tests of an intermediate-range ground-launched cruise missile, which led the United States to accuse Russia of violating the 1987 INF Treaty.
- Russia employs a greater variety of platforms. These include, for example, small surface ships and diesel-powered submarines. Russia even hints at launchers hidden inside standard shipping containers, which can conceal intermediate-range SLCMs, the tracking of which would be almost impossible.
- Russia is enhancing the accuracy of its old, Soviet-era weapons, which demonstrates its propensity for quick and low-cost solutions. In Syria, for example, Russia was able to significantly increase the accuracy of "dumb" bombs dropped from Su-24s fighter jets by more accurately positioning them and better calculating the moment the bomb is dropped.
- Perhaps the most tangible difference involves the relationship between nuclear and conventional capability. Since the early 1990s, the United States has shifted emphasis from the former to the latter because nuclear weapons seemed less relevant. In short, conventional capability partially replaced nuclear capability. While Moscow initially declared a desire to do the same, its approach seems to have changed and conventional capability appears to be an addition to nuclear capability. All of its new weapon delivery systems are dual-capable and can be used to carry either nuclear or conventional warheads depending on the mission.

### **Conventional Missions**

Russia's long-range, conventional weapons have two roles. The first is conventional deterrence. This mission was introduced by the latest Russian Military Doctrine as a means to deter the use of force by the United States and NATO. In the past, in 2000, this mission was assigned to nuclear weapons, but deterrence through limited nuclear use is not particularly credible and, already then, it was officially announced that reliance on nuclear weapons was a "temporary fix" until Russia modernized its conventional capability. Moscow announced this capability in 2013 and demonstrated it in 2015.

A closer look at the new Russian capability suggests deficiencies in NATO planning (at least when it comes to publicly available information). NATO planning—for example, regarding the defence of the Baltic states (as with deployment of a few additional

battalions and predeployment of heavy equipment)—seems to be predicated on the assumption that Russia will employ the same tactics that it used in Ukraine. NATO's other scenario is an invasion by Russian troops across Poland's Suwalki gap—in effect, a copy of the Cold War scenario of an invasion through Germany's Fulda gap. These scenarios appear to overlook Russia's capability to reach targets not only in the Baltic states or Poland, but literally across Europe, without Russian troops crossing borders, giving it a capability to disrupt NATO reinforcements, communications, and strike assets. These strikes can be launched from airborne platforms, from nuclear powered attack submarines, and even from SLCM-carrying diesel submarines in the Black Sea, whose range reaches to London.

Still, Moscow is clearly aware of the risks of engaging in direct conflict with NATO. Its posture appears to emphasize deterrence rather than offense. Assets deployed in Kaliningrad Oblast, the Russian exclave between Poland and Lithuania, appear to have predominantly regional (if not local) missions, including access denial and air defense. Surprisingly, the Baltic Sea Fleet is not receiving the modification of the diesel-powered submarines equipped for SLCMs.

It should be mentioned that there is a domestic component to Russia's posture toward NATO. Russia's enhanced but controlled level of tension with NATO—achieved “on the cheap” using air force flights close to NATO borders and harassment of NATO ships and aircraft—is also a deliberate way for the Kremlin to foster a “rally-around-the-flag” phenomenon inside its own country.

Russia's second mission, one that has far-reaching consequences, is limited use of force in contingencies other than vis-a-vis the United States and NATO. Modern, long-range, precision-guided, conventional weapons can be assigned to scenarios similar to the use of force employed by the United States in the Middle East and in the Balkans. Russia's new capability would have an impact on many countries, especially those in the vicinity of Russia. These states will now need to factor in the ability of Russia to employ a wider variety of forces than in previous years.

The region of greatest interest to Russia appears to be the Middle East. This region represents a major threat (militant Islamic extremism and growing instability) but also a great opportunity. The region is in semi-chaos, allowing Moscow freedom to act utilizing a set of shifting alliances and local support. It has used military bases in Syria and in Iran. Russia's deployment of its new strike assets (cruise missiles, bombers, and SLCMs in the Caspian and the Black Seas) clearly indicates that these are primarily intended for use in the Middle East rather than in Europe. If Russia succeeds in stabilizing the situation in Syria, it could use that success as a springboard for enhancing Russia's status and influence across Eurasia.

## The Window of Opportunity (or Necessity)

Paradoxically, the greatest challenge to the interests of the United States and its allies is not the new Russian capability itself but rather Washington's state of denial regarding its strategic implications. Few in Washington seem prepared, psychologically and politically, to accept that Russia's demonstration of its newly acquired conventional capability amounts to: 1) the eventual loss of the West's monopoly on the proactive use of force in support of foreign policy; 2) changes in the nature of the global "game"; and 3) the need to adjust global and regional strategies. Moscow's disruption of Washington's Syria strategy should be a tangible warning about the future.

With its missile launches into Syria, Russia conducted an important demonstration. But full operational capability and scale are still years away. A look at statements by Russian military leaders suggests that they expect maturity of their new weapons systems around 2022. At a minimum, Russia needs to produce many more platforms and weapons. Even Russia's fairly short (although intense) employment of conventional SLCMs in Syria in 2015-2016 depleted the stockpile of these weapons.

Having conventional strike weapons is but one part of achieving full capability. Fully integrated command, control, intelligence, target acquisition, and other such systems are required. The space component of the reconnaissance-strike complex seems to present the greatest challenge for Russia, and this realm is probably the main reason for Russia's relatively long development timeline. This component might be about seven years away, and should be treated as the window of opportunity for the West. Washington and NATO should adjust policies with the understanding that returning to the *status quo ante* is not possible. Russia is increasingly capable of supporting its foreign policy endeavors with military power and will not be shy about it.

## Conclusion

There is reason to believe that Russia's current confrontation with NATO fits a certain pattern of Russian leadership—it focuses the attention and resources of the West on a region where further Russian moves are actually unlikely. Although it will continue to develop conventional deterrence options vis-à-vis NATO and Europe, the "game" will most likely be played in the greater Middle East and South Asia, where Russia has a significantly better chance of procuring results.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the West is the fact that Russia's emerging capability is not subject to any arms control regimes. Effectively, Moscow is free to develop almost any type of asset and deploy it in any mode, anywhere, and in any quantity. As the number of weapons and supporting capabilities (in particular targeting) continues to increase, Russia's conventional weapons will have progressively greater bearing on its adjacent regions, in particular Europe and the Middle East.

For more than two decades, the United States has successfully resisted Russia's demands to include conventional long-range weapons in arms control talks. That policy served the West well as long as it possessed a monopoly on these weapons (even though this situation also led Russia to rely more on nuclear weapons). But if that monopoly is coming to an end, the gap in arms control regimes will soon become counterproductive for the West itself. Changing a decades-old position will be difficult and politically controversial, but it appears to be the only reliable way to control Russia's emerging conventional capabilities, even at the price of extending the same rules and limitations to similar Western (especially U.S.) weapons. The new regime should include not only existing, but also, more importantly, future systems, the ones that are at the research and development stage today, first and foremost hypersonic systems.

Although aspects of the 1970s U.S.-Soviet "Third World" competitive era are back, the scale of the challenge is not the same—Russia is not trying to promote Communism—thus making the chances for East-West accommodation greater, but also making the contours of the "game" less well defined and strategically more challenging. Nonetheless, Russia's new weapon developments are fraught with adverse consequences; hard, new, and intelligent choices are needed in Washington. The non-nuclear weapons superiority that the West has held for twenty-five years is disappearing and decisions need to be made soon. The closer Russia comes to acquiring full capability, the less inclined it will be to make concessions.

# Russia's Conventional Deterrence

## AN ENHANCED TOOL FOR BOTH WARFIGHTING AND POLITICAL STRATEGY

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 466

March 2017

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Over the last two decades, conventional (non-nuclear) deterrence in Russia's military strategy has changed from being a sub-tactical, sub-strategic warfighting tool to being a separate military-political factor—a self-contained component in Russia's strategic deterrence concept. Soon after Russia revised its military doctrine in 2014, it applied this conventional deterrence concept in its Syria campaign—against the backdrop of being under international pressure vis-à-vis the Ukraine conflict and Russia-NATO tensions. In Syria, Russia fired new types of long-range, precision-guided missiles, showcasing these weapons both as battlefield tools and as geopolitical instruments of deterrence.

### The “Second Conventional Age”

After the era of World Wars and nuclear arms races, a conventional deterrence renaissance took place. This so-called “[second conventional age](#)” was marked by the development of modern conventional weapons: long-range, precise ballistic and cruise missiles that use advanced intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance systems. These modern technologies include not only classic strike platforms—ballistic and cruise missiles, artillery systems, other precision-guided munitions (PGMs)—but also weapons based on new physical principles, for example, hypersonic weapons, self-maneuvering reentry vehicles (MaRVs), anti-satellite and space weapons, and new types of non-kinetic, non-nuclear weapons (cyber, radio-electronic, electromagnetic).

[According](#) to Russian military experts, the technological development of conventional weapons by many countries “has made such progress that the destruction of a single element of infrastructure, communication, and control systems can lead to a catastrophe, able to throw a country back many years in its development.” Conventional weapons have reached such a combination of range, accuracy, and lethality that even leading nuclear powers effectively rely on them for strategic deterrence. The important advantage of non-nuclear deterrence application is also that even the most powerful conventional munitions, such as Russia's thermobaric warheads, do not have the serious

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radioactive side effects accompanied by every type of nuclear weapon, even so-called mini-nukes. The conventionalization of strategic deterrence by the key nuclear powers – the United States, Russia, and China – has led to the partial substitution of at least regional-level nuclear deterrence by conventional deterrence, based on long-range PGMs.

### **Dynamics in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Russian Conceptual Approaches**

Given the closed nature of military-strategic studies in the Soviet Union, the issue of conventional deterrence never received public attention in Soviet military and political theory, in contrast to Western countries. This was mainly due to the fact that the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies enjoyed significant quantitative and even qualitative offensive superiority in conventional forces in Europe.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the neglected status of Russia's conventional deterrence began to change, although only gradually. The main reason was the growing role of nuclear deterrence against the decline of Russian conventional forces vis-à-vis the opposite processes taking place in the United States and leading NATO countries. Meanwhile, the interest of Russian academia in conventional deterrence was mainly focused on conventional arms control (for instance, on issues related to the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe), with only very limited study of the impact of conventional PGMs on strategic stability and nuclear deterrence. For example, there was not much consideration given to counterforce threats from U.S. precision conventional sea and air launch cruise missiles (SLCMs and ALCMs) against Russian strategic nuclear silo-based and mobile intercontinental ballistic missile forces.

Only from the beginning of the 2000s did the role of conventional forces in Russia's strategic deterrence outlook begin to take shape and be considered an initial element in the early de-escalation of military conflicts (prior to the possible use of nuclear weapons). According to Russian military experts, one of the key advantages of conventional deterrence was that it increased the nuclear threshold. As Christine Leah [wrote](#) in December 2015, "conventional weapons are used to deter aggression beginning with the threat to inflict sufficient damage to the adversary's forces and military and economic potential, and ending with the threat of nuclear escalation of the conflict to the extent of a massive nuclear exchange."

From the beginning, the post-Soviet Russian conceptual approaches to conventional deterrence considered it not so much a military-political tool as a practical warfighting instrument, one that was relevant especially in low-scale, local conflicts in which nuclear weapons were useless to apply. Russian military theorists used to consider non-nuclear deterrence as a convenient military-political addition to tactical nuclear weapons. It is not accidental that since the 1990s, the Russian professional discourse (for example,

studies by Andrei Kokoshin) have been [applying](#) the terms “non-nuclear deterrence” or “pre-nuclear deterrence” and not just “conventional deterrence.”

The improved accuracy and lethality of conventional weapons progressively upgraded their role in Russia's deterrence strategy. The significance of conventional deterrence as a practical operational-tactical warfighting instrument also increased. Even though the theoretical foundations of conventional deterrence started to develop in Russia in the late 1990s, the practical testing and demonstration of its advanced technical capacity took place recently, in Syria. This applies especially to strategic level PGMs, for example the 3M54 Kalibr cruise missile, but also covers advanced weapon projects such as the Yu-71 glide vehicle or 3K22 Zircon hypersonic cruise missile.

### **A Self-Contained Component of Russian Strategic Deterrence**

Russia's approach to conventional deterrence differs from the U.S. Conventional Prompt Global Strike (CPGS) program. [According](#) to one prominent U.S. expert, the U.S. concept is one of “a missile in a search of a mission,” meaning that the existence of detailed technical research and development products and programs comes before mission goals or being mentioned in the U.S. strategic doctrine.

According to Russian officials, the technical and conceptual development of Russian non-nuclear deterrence is mainly [aimed in response](#) to the CPGS. The assessment of the U.S. long-range conventional PGM counterforce capacity (for example, the Block IV Tomahawks) indicates that at the current stage there is no guarantee that such strikes against Russian nuclear silo-based and mobile ground missile launchers will succeed. However, the U.S. non-nuclear PGMs can already complement tactical (non-strategic) nuclear weapons and undermine the general balance between the two nuclear superpowers. Russian experts argue that any further technological development of the CPGS (together with the enhancement of the U.S. ballistic missile defense system and a new generation of PGMs) will [create existential threats](#) to Russia's strategic deterrence capacity. According to estimates by the U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM), conventional PGMs can already [destroy](#) 10 to 30 percent of the nuclear weapons counterforce targets in Russia.

Non-nuclear weapons used to hold a low place in the framework of Russia's global strategic deterrence. This changed due to Russian technological developments, and it now seeks to use the capability in the context of “central nuclear deterrence” between Russia and the United States, and also, potentially, as a tool against “second echelon” nuclear powers. The development of high-precision long-range strategic non-nuclear weapons (SNNW) might soon become a matter of arms control negotiations between Moscow and Washington, with discussion on the development of ground- and sea-launch ballistic and cruise missiles, long-range attack unmanned aerial vehicles,

compliance with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), and other arms control agreements.

Since the late Cold War period, the United States has had a near-monopoly on Tomahawk-type missiles. This is why Washington was not interested in discussing this issue during negotiations on the New START Treaty. But now the situation has changed: the first salvos of Russian Kalibr missiles and the [combat debuts](#) of the Kh-101 ALCM in Syria have significantly shifted the overall context of strategic arms control negotiations. The possible deployment of the new Russian 9M729 missile (SSC-8), which resembles a ground version of the Kalibr SLCM or Kh-101 ALCM but uses a mobile launcher (the same used for the Iskander-M missiles), is more complicated in the strategic arms control context; the issue is that these Russian measures very likely directly [violate](#) the provisions of the [INF Treaty](#).

Despite the active debate on concepts and prospects for technological development, many Russian experts argue that conventional deterrence is not able to fully replace nuclear deterrence at both the global and regional level. However, the development of SNNWs can make considerable changes in the overall concept of Russian strategic deterrence. The SNNWs may be able to deal with a conventional de-escalation scenario in case there is a conflict situation between nuclear superpowers (in the framework of the famous Russian concept of “de-escalation through escalation”) as well as to deliver preventive strikes against nuclear and non-nuclear targets without relying on nuclear capacity.

Russia's SNNW will not replace tactical (non-strategic) nuclear weapons but will serve as an important component of regional, strategic-level deterrence. The Ukraine conflict fostered this process and the Russian Syrian campaign brought it to light. According to Sergey Shoigu's statement in January 2017, Russia's Ministry of Defense is planning to increase the capacity of their SNNW by a factor of four by 2021, which will allow Russia to [further shift](#) its deterrence capacities from nuclear to non-nuclear measures.

### **Practical Warfighting Capacity**

Russia's long-range PGMs are in linked development across its land, air, and sea forces. Alongside their role as strategic deterrence, these weapons are meant to be anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) in scope—aimed to [deny](#) possible adversaries access to strategic regions such as in the Black and Baltic Seas and near the Northern and Pacific Fleet nuclear submarine bases. Russia has equipped its bastions in the Baltic Sea (Kaliningrad) and Black Sea (Crimea) with the long-range A2/AD systems.\* Russia also created an A2/AD “bubble” over Syria.

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\* Russia's concept of so-called “sea bastions” was developed during the Cold War and aimed to defend Soviet nuclear submarines deployment bases in the context of U.S. and NATO naval superiority. See: James

The counteraction against the Russian and Chinese A2/AD systems serves as one of the arguments among U.S. military planners for the further development of the CGPS program. Therefore, it is natural that in order to counter the U.S. conventional prompt strikes, as well as for the effective implementation of its own A2/AD, Russian non-nuclear deterrence acquires a new meaning on operative-tactical and sub-strategic levels. For example, the development of an effective Russian A2/AD system can directly influence regional security issues in Europe. In this context, the building of long-range conventional A2/AD capacity in Kaliningrad creates a new strategic reality in relations between Russia and NATO, especially when it comes to the [Baltic countries](#).

After the Ukraine conflict, some Western experts are keen to describe Russian conventional deterrence as part of a wider strategic approach (for instance, cross-domain coercion) and try to link it with “hybrid warfare” and other newfangled [conceptions](#) aimed at describing Russian policy in the post-Soviet region. In addition, it is widely discussed in expert circles whether NATO should return to the implementation of its own conventional deterrence policy in order to react to the growing potential of Russian conventional forces and systems of non-nuclear deterrence. Experts are taking into consideration the combination of Russian hybrid warfare and its A2/AD systems—systems that reinforce each other—in the context of potential Russian designs on East European countries. The [notion](#) is that Russia could “create a sort of double deterrence to NATO intervention in a military crisis.”

Finally, another area where Russian conventional deterrence could be applied, especially traditional long-range PGMs, is against terrorism, which according to the Russian Military Doctrine is a major threat, and specifically the targeted [killing](#) of terrorist leaders. Of note, the fight against terrorism is also presented as one of the official priorities in the U.S. CPGS program.

## Conclusion

Conventional (non-nuclear) deterrence has evolved significantly in Russian military and strategic thinking. It is a sub-strategic warfighting tool, as well as a separate military-political strategic deterrence element. The main area where this reverberates is in the post-Soviet region but it has impact on Europe and the Middle East. It is a self-contained element of the Russian global level strategic deterrence system and can be in accompaniment to Russia's strategic nuclear weapons and non-kinetic cyber and radio-electronic warfare weapons. On the regional level, Russia's conventional (non-nuclear) deterrence systems can be applied in combination with tactical (non-strategic) nuclear weapons to provide flexibility in strategic deterrence, especially in crisis situations in which Moscow's political goals are limited. The missiles and munitions are also practical

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J. Wirtz, “Strategic Conventional Deterrence: Lessons from the Maritime Strategy,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 3, Autumn 1993, p.132-137.

warfighting military instruments that contribute to strengthening the A2/AD capacity of Russia's conventional forces. This includes the application of PGMs in regional, low-intensity, and asymmetric conflicts and in fighting terrorism.

In short, Russia's new conventional (non-nuclear) deterrence capability and doctrinal language provides political underpinnings and geopolitical influence when deterrence is aimed at maintaining regional balance and promoting Russian geopolitical interests in the post-Soviet region, Eastern Europe, Middle East, and probably beyond.

# The European Missile Defense System and Russia

CAN THERE BE DIALOGUE RATHER THAN AN ARMS RACE?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No.

February 2017

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The official inauguration of a European missile defense (MD) site in Romania in the spring of 2016 triggered a new wave of anti-Western rhetoric in Russia. President Vladimir Putin declared that the system being deployed in Romania and Poland was not defensive, but part of the U.S. strategic nuclear capability. Therefore, he [said in May 2016](#), Moscow “will be forced to think about neutralizing the emerging threats to Russia's security.”

Assessing the seriousness of Russian concerns and therefore the chances for East-West dialogue on the issue requires a clear differentiation between the political and technical elements of the Russian position. The political elements are primarily the increasingly confrontational relationship with the United States and NATO that Russia had pursued during the U.S. presidency of Barack Obama, with which, Russia's leadership apparently concluded, dialogue was impossible and useless. Russian domestic politics have been a factor in the Russian stance; the Kremlin has a need to present the public with an external enemy. The technical element is the apparent adherence of the Russian military to the fundamentals of strategic deterrence theory – paying attention to whether the future system (including the US-based component) is capable of undermining Russia's deterrence capability, with this latter parameter determining the degree of urgency of the concern. A new feature of the technical military relationship is the increasingly important non-nuclear stand-off between Russia and NATO over whether Russia and NATO can intercept precision-guided conventional weapons launched by the other side. This new element represents a “wild card” in the decades-old stand-off around missile defense.

In order to explore the credibility of Russian threats and possible actions and the ways of addressing them, it is necessary to unpack the Russian position. This can lead to an understanding of whether dialogue between Russia and the United States is possible. Although much depends on the new U.S. administration, MD continues to be an issue that unites Congress (Democrats and Republicans) in its determination to resist foreign

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pressure and binding agreements over the future placement and capabilities of the MD system.

### **The Sources of the Russian Position**

Confrontation between Russia and the United States over MD is more than 35 years old. Friction began with the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI, also known as “Star Wars”) that was launched by former president Ronald Reagan and has continued unabated during several iterations of the MD program. Throughout those years, the Russian position was informed by the logic of mutual deterrence that underlined the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which Moscow always calls “the cornerstone of strategic stability.”\*

The current stage of the U.S.-Russian argument began in the late 1990s when Washington launched internal discussions about a national MD system. The situation went from exacerbation to full-fledged enmity (on Moscow’s part) when the United States abrogated the Soviet-era ABM Treaty in 2002 and the George W. Bush administration then set forth a plan to deploy strategic missile defenses (Ground Based Interceptors, GBI) in Hungary and Poland in 2004-2008. Moscow never believed the official reasons for this deployment – the threat of Iranian missiles – and considered it an effort to neutralize Russia’s deterrence shield. U.S. assurances that the system would remain limited were not believed and Moscow insisted on legally binding guarantees that would put official limitations on the capabilities and placement of the European MD system.

The situation somewhat abated in 2009, when the United States rejected a plan for GBI strategic MD deployment in Europe and switched to a Phased Adaptive Approach (PAA), which presupposed theater missile defense and theoretically would not be usable against Russian strategic ICBMs. The first three phases of the plan (Aegis systems in Romania and Poland as well as on ships in the Mediterranean Sea and the Baltic Sea) apparently encountered relatively less resistance from the Russian military. The controversy centered on the fourth phase (deployment of Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) IIB interceptors in Poland), which, Moscow claimed, could have capability against its strategic missiles. In 2013, because of a North Korean nuclear test, the United States abandoned the fourth stage of the plan and decided instead to deploy additional interceptors on U.S. territory and limit the European component to SM-3 IIA interceptors with non-strategic capabilities. Moscow expressed its disappointment again. The main reason remained the absence of officially binding limits on MD capability, which could guarantee that in the future it would not be able to undermine Russian offensive capability vis-a-vis the United States.

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<sup>2</sup> Igor Ivanov, [\*Novaya Rossiyskaya Diplomatiya. Desyat let vneshney politiki strany\*](#) [*New Russian Diplomacy. Ten Years of Foreign Policy*], Olma Press, Moscow, 2002, p. 72.



Russian efforts to “restore strategic stability” have been predictable. Moscow is actively developing a new generation of missiles capable of penetrating the MD system. Most of its programs have been resurrected from the Cold War, when the Soviet Union invested in the development of missile defense penetration systems in response to the SDI program. In particular, the new Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICMBs), such as the *Yars* or *Sarmat*, feature multiple independently targetable vehicles, each able to alter its trajectory. Russia also plans for the *Sarmat* to use a new type of fuel that provides high-speed performance, reducing the time the missile is in the active stage of its trajectory. These types of missile developments, along with the use of decoys on ICBMs, make them far more capable of confusing MD systems.

Whereas the military-technical component of the Russian position (concern about the stability of strategic deterrence) has remained virtually unchanged through the years, political tensions have grown considerably, with Western capabilities initially appearing as a distant, almost theoretical challenge but now appearing to constitute an immediate threat of apocalyptic proportions. This anxiety can be traced to several reasons. One is that high Russian threat perceptions are based on a deep feeling of insecurity and a generally geopolitical interpretation of international affairs. Russians are still very fond of the geopolitical concepts of Halford Mackinder, who theorized Eurasia as “heartland,” or strategic territory, the possession of which can be the key to world dominance. Moscow therefore harbors ideas that as soon as Russia gets weaker, it might be blackmailed (by the threat of overwhelming power) or even invaded by the West in an effort to take over the heartland. The other reason comes from the Kremlin’s efforts to maintain domestic stability by presenting NATO, and especially the United States, to its public as an enemy. In fact, NATO’s military deployments in Europe inadvertently strengthen Putin’s regime, feeding Moscow’s propagandistic declarations that it was the West who first started aggressive preparations along Russia’s borders. Therefore, today all problems of domestic and international development (including the arms race and Russian military adventures) are justified by the Kremlin’s “struggle with the American drive for world dominance.”

### New Developments

Russia is deploying high-precision weapons that are capable of defeating the European and potentially US-based MD components. This idea is elaborated by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev’s speech [describing](#) the deployment of offensive systems in southern and western Russia as a possible response to European MD so as “to ensure Russia’s capability to take out any part of the U.S. MD system in Europe.”

On the surface, the logic of Russian opposition to the new MD sites is the same as that regarding strategic defense—those sites could theoretically deny Russia the capability to strike targets in European NATO. This contingency is becoming more tangible as Russia



is deploying long-range conventional weapons that can thwart the scenario (long a central concern for the military) of the United States and NATO using precision-guided conventional assets from long distance. While the MD sites in Poland and Romania can be used effectively against Russian strategic missiles remains contested, they are certainly usable against Russian theater-range systems. Russian officials suggest that the MK-41 vertical launchers for the SM-3 system are capable of launching cruise missiles, which could in the future affect Russian long-range conventional capability.

Countering the Russian long-range conventional capabilities could present a challenge to NATO: existing missile defense systems were not designed to intercept cruise missiles, such as *Kalibr* submarine-launched cruise missile (SLCMs) or Kh-101 (conventional warhead)/102 (nuclear warhead) ALCMs (Airfield lighting control and monitoring system), both of which were successfully demonstrated by Moscow during its military operation in Syria. In particular, the location of the MD site in Deveselu, Romania is theoretically well suited to intercept *Kalibrs* deployed from the Black Sea (from which they can reach targets across most of Europe), but such a mission would require serious research and development work before SLCMs could be intercepted. For now, it is expected that Russia will deploy *Kalibr* at its naval bases in Sebastopol and Novorossiysk to overcome the MD SM-3 site in Deveselu. A successful *Kalibr* deployment can be supported by the deployment of new ALCM Kh-101/102 (conventional/nuclear) systems and the deployment of *Iskander* missiles in Kaliningrad. The latter can reach almost all of Poland and parts of Germany, which means the European MD sites will be endangered and can be potentially destroyed.

For its part, Russia has long pursued its own missile defense capability. Its S-300 and S-400 as well as lower-level systems (such as *Redut*, which still has several construction [problems](#)) are designed to [deny](#) NATO the ability to strike targets inside Russia. Russia has successfully tested these systems against aircraft and missiles, including against cruise missiles (the Soviet Union began work on this in the early 1980s), and Moscow believes that the systems are now at least as efficient as those of NATO. Russian missiles and air defense systems were created to protect against U.S./NATO long-range conventional superiority. This has been much more urgent for Moscow than the MD issue. For now, both sides have similar conventional long strike assets and defensive capabilities.

It is worth mentioning that there are no current treaties limiting the development of long-range conventional missile capabilities or missile defenses, so in these conditions the potential for a future arms race is very high. There is the potential, therefore, for the United States and Russia to engage in bargaining about missile defenses and long-strike conventional capabilities in one package, which could help both countries (and other states) avoid a massive arms race.

### What Can be Done to Reduce Friction?

The current level of dialogue between Russia and the West allows two options to be considered.

The first one addresses a gradually unfolding arms race, which is developing now and which can be aggravated if Russia deploys its missiles or defensive systems along NATO's southern and western flanks (in Crimea and Kaliningrad) NATO is likely to contribute to the race by enhancing the offensive and the defensive elements of its deterrence posture.

There are three moves that could potentially be used as bargaining tools in the West's dialogue with Russia, though each with a significant measure of risk:

(a) NATO could enhance its MD capabilities in Poland to be able to intercept Russian conventional long-range missiles (which are aimed at Europe). This potential capability could be helpful as a bargaining chip to influence further Russian military deployments.

(b) Russia might be influenced by a threat to move American tactical nuclear weapons eastward (to the territories of Poland or the Baltic states, for example) to confront the deployment of *Iskanders*, for example.

(c) Ukraine and Georgia could be invited to participate in NATO military preparations, such as providing territory for the Alliance's military deployments. In this case, military cooperation with these two states could be used as a bargaining chip with Russia.

The risk is that any of these potential actions could trigger more assertive Russian policies and deployments. Military initiatives by both sides, at present, seem prone to fostering an arms-race scenario.

A second broad option is to resume arms control efforts, which happened in the 1960s when there was a spiraling nuclear arms race.

There is the distinct possibility that a high level of NATO-Russia military preparedness creates a stability-instability paradox, whereby a major war becomes impossible due to the growing conventional offense and defense capabilities of both sides (a Cold War-like situation).

An arms control regime is missing at present. If this situation remains unregulated, there is a high probability of a full-scale arms race and an unintended "hot" conflict. Moscow continues to demand meaningful limitations on missile defenses and long-range conventional strike weapons—the West could leverage this interest in negotiations. Russia could lose this interest in the near future, however, as it goes about rapidly

pursuing capabilities of its own. The first step would be to put long-range conventional strike assets on the table before they are massively produced and deployed by Russia. This concerns not only the *Kalibr* and “Kh – 101/102” families, but also the future destiny of tactical nuclear weapons, in the realm of which Russia retains a major advantage in Europe. If NATO officially defines some limits on the development of missile defenses, Russia might be more prone to dialogue and the negotiating table.

## **Conclusion**

At present, the prospects for arms control look bleak. Neither side is prepared to seriously engage in such discussions. NATO seems concentrated on deterring Russia and has been providing only lip service about cooperation. For its part, Russian calls for arms control, based on concerns about the deployment of European MD, appear half-hearted, with Moscow concentrating on enhancing its own deterrence capacity. Moreover, Russia’s successful conclusion of a series of research and development programs makes it less interested in arms control. In the past, Russia loudly insisted on including long-range conventional weapons in negotiations, but these demands have lost intensity. Reversing the trajectory of today’s budding arms race, which has been gathering steam over a long period of time, and which sharply accelerated due to the Ukraine conflict, appears slim. However, both sides can calm the situation if either chooses to do so.

# U.S.-Russia Nuclear Lab-to-Lab Cooperation

## LOOKING BACK ON A QUARTER CENTURY OF CONSTRUCTIVE RELATIONS

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 425

March 2016

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With the latest protracted nosedive in U.S.-Russia relations, when areas of cooperation have continued to shrink, it is beneficial to reflect on historically constructive joint endeavors, such as the cooperation between the two countries' nuclear weapon laboratories ("lab-to-lab cooperation").

Since 1992, cooperative efforts in this field have produced mutual trust and promoted the common goals of global nuclear safety and nonproliferation. Throughout this relationship, those who participated successfully reconciled their commitment to national security with the benefits of working with a former adversary in pursuit of a meaningful cause. In addition to a safer world and scientific advances, the major payoffs of this collaboration were a wealth of professional and personal ties and an accumulation of mutual trust.

The sentiment from laboratories in both the United States and Russia is that this cooperation was not only productive in its time but should continue. The challenge is how to renew the support for such endeavors in Moscow and in Washington.

### **The "Lab-to-Lab" Relationship**

The principal nuclear weapons facilities involved in the collaboration were, from the United States, Los Alamos (LANL, New Mexico), Lawrence Livermore (LLNL, California), and Sandia (SNL, New Mexico/California), and from Russia, VNIIEF (Sarov), VNIITF (Snezhinsk), and VNIIA (Moscow).

The lab-to-lab relationship was authorized and supervised by government agencies, but it evolved at the grassroots level and in its initial stage enjoyed a modest degree of

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autonomy from government bureaucracy. According to a 1996 interagency document, the U.S. government recognized the lab-to-lab connection as a valuable instrument of national security and foreign policy. The United States used it to pursue the strategic goals of reducing dangers posed by the post-Soviet transformation of the Russian nuclear weapons complex at a time when Russia was undergoing a challenging socioeconomic transition. The Russian government supported lab-to-lab programs to help fulfill its disarmament and nonproliferation obligations and to sustain a uniquely qualified nuclear workforce during hard economic times.

Financially, lab-to-lab cooperation depended on U.S. funds. Despite this asymmetry, specialists from both countries regarded the lab-to-lab cooperation as an equitable relationship based on a synergy of scientific strengths and a parity of intellectual assets.

Cooperation involved thousands of specialists in three main areas of activity: fundamental science, nuclear safety and security, and defense conversion. In the “pure” lab-to-lab collaboration scheme, U.S. laboratories directly contracted Russian scientists and projects were paid for out of research or discretionary funds. In subsequent years, the lab-to-lab process channeled resources from a range of intergovernmental programs on disarmament, nonproliferation, and defense conversion, including the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program and the International Science and Technology Center (ISTC), as well as in more specialized areas related to nuclear warhead safety (WSSX) and the safety and security of fissile materials (MPC&A).

The WSSX Agreement, which entered into force in 1995, expired in 2005 when Russia opted not to extend it. In the years since, other programs have closed: in June 2013, Moscow informed Washington that it would not renew the CTR umbrella agreement, which provided the legal framework for CTR projects in Russia. (A new bilateral protocol placed U.S. CTR projects in Russia under the existing Framework Agreement on a Multilateral Nuclear Environmental Program in the Russian Federation, signed in 2003). At the end of 2014, a ceremony was held outside Sarov to mark the termination of the MPC&A Agreement of 1999. Russia’s withdrawal from the ISTC was planned in 2010; the closure of its Moscow office was announced in July 2015 and the ISTC Secretariat moved to Astana, Kazakhstan. In September 2013, the United States and Russia signed an agreement on cooperation in nuclear- and energy-related scientific research that could serve as an umbrella for renewed lab-to-lab contacts, but it remains effectively frozen.

### **An Unlikely Relationship**

With its depth, productivity, linkages, and accomplished projects, U.S.-Russian nuclear lab-to-lab cooperation came to be seen as an established reality. However, from the vantage point of the late 1980s, when members of nuclear labs met face-to-face for the first time, such advances were unthinkable. Two steps made them possible.

*Governments Open the Gate*

As much as lab-to-lab cooperation came to be defined as a grassroots, peer-to-peer relationship, the gate was opened at the intergovernmental level. It was a unique historical moment when Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan introduced a sense of dynamism and innovation into the previously straitlaced field of bilateral arms control and nuclear disarmament. In a domain so core to national security as nuclear weapons, no grassroots action was imaginable without explicit government authorization.

At the behest of both states, senior specialists from U.S. and Soviet nuclear weapons laboratories came together in Geneva in 1987 to help diplomats resolve a longstanding problem that was holding up ratification of the 1974 Threshold Test Ban Treaty (TTBT). The issue was disagreement over verification procedures. In an innovative move, the two sides decided to solve the problem with experiments that would allow nuclear experts to cross-evaluate the accuracy of nuclear weapon yield measurement methods. This Joint Verification Experiment (JVE) project, signed in 1988 by George Schultz and Eduard Shevardnadze, envisioned conducting two nuclear test explosions, in Nevada and Semipalatinsk, with yield measurements taken onsite by both sides.

U.S. Ambassador C. Paul Robinson, who was on the JVE negotiation team, recalled the “nearly 3-inch thick” agreement:

Besides spelling out all of the technologies which both sides agreed would be used in these joint experiments, the substantial size was necessitated mostly by very detailed guarantees to assure the safety and personal security of the inspectors and participants while on the other’s territory. All “good intentions by both sides” notwithstanding, the JVE experiments began in what was an atmosphere of great distrust of each other’s motives.\*

*Professional Affinity Emerges*

The shared experience of jointly applying technical expertise to help achieve common goals during the JVE became the impetus for future lab-to-lab contacts. The actual hands-on collaborative work on numerous challenges involved in a nuclear test with parallel measurements in unfamiliar conditions quickly put interactions on a professional footing.

Several accounts reveal how important it was for both sides to compare notes. As [reported](#) on the website of VNIITF (the lead Soviet laboratory for the JVE):

The JVE showed that the Russian specialists use computational and experimental methods that are often better theoretically elaborated and more accurate [than

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<sup>2</sup> This and subsequent quotations are from papers in the forthcoming volume by Siegfried Hecker.

those of their American counterparts]. The American side apparently drew their own conclusions.

Because the nuclear experts from both sides were scientists, plans to extend collaboration into scientific endeavors naturally emerged. Siegfried Hecker, director of LANL, recalled a conversation he had with Vadim Simonenko, the Soviet lead measurements specialist, at a dinner in 1988 to commemorate the successful completion of the Nevada test. Simonenko mused that the unique physical conditions during the nuclear test explosion should be used to pursue a strictly scientific joint collaboration. Both Hecker and Simonenko promoted scientific collaboration between the Russian and American laboratories over subsequent years.

### **The Joy of Doing Science Together**

The JVE project led its participants to recognize that they shared a common identity as scientists and professionals, and that this could parallel their respective national security missions. Fortunately, the trajectory of bilateral relations allowed them to pursue interests and aspirations based on such recognition.

The desire to do science together was a substantial bonding factor at all stages of the lab-to-lab cooperation. From the start, Russian nuclear weapons scientists were especially eager to cooperate. Due to the top-secret status of their domain, they had been “invisible observers” for decades of developments taking place internationally in their scientific fields. Their U.S. laboratory peers were natural partners who could validate methods, compare results, and pool resources in pursuit of knowledge. In turn, U.S. scientists were driven by an intense curiosity about the state of Russian nuclear science and the complementarity of their respective strengths in fields of common interest.

After the JVE ended, prodding for scientific collaboration continued, initiated in large part by the Soviet side. In 1989-1990, scientists from VNIIEF and VNIITF, independently but with official support, reached out to their U.S. counterparts with a series of specific proposals for collaboration in the field of super high magnetic fields (VNIIEF) and nuclear physics and thermodynamics (VNIITF).

In an unprecedented move, in 1990 VNIITF and VNIIEF allowed individual American lab colleagues inside the security perimeters of their laboratory complexes. The visit to VNIIEF was arranged as an “impromptu” side trip from Moscow by Viktor Mikhailov, then Deputy Atomic Energy Minister for the nuclear weapons complex. On both occasions, lists of potential topics for collaboration and written proposals to cooperate were handed to the U.S. visitors.

The symbolic starting point of the lab-to-lab relationships was February 1992 when LANL and LLNL in the United States, and VNIIEF and VNIITF in Russia, took turns

hosting each other's directors and leading scientists. Rady Ilkaev, future VNIIEF leader, who with his colleagues welcomed the U.S. scientists to their institute, recalls:

It was remarkable that specialists from another country lying across the ocean from us understood our problems and our issues in a flash.

Steven Younger, who for many years served as the LANL point-of-contact for collaborative programs with Russia, captured the feeling on the American side:

Though we sat in Russian facilities rather than our familiar offices in Los Alamos, our American cohort often felt almost as if we were looking at ourselves in a mirror, staring across the conference table at our Russian counterparts.

Joint experiments and research activities took off in the fall of 1993, when LANL and VNIIEF conducted a series of joint experiments in high magnetic fields. Both sides provided unique resources that opened possibilities that were separately unachievable. Their series of joint experiments in this area continued for fifteen years. VNIIEF signed its initial contracts with LLNL in the summer of 1994 in areas of high-temperature plasma characteristic calculations and the study of potential designs for X-ray lasers on neon-like ions. Many more projects followed.

### **Enacting Shared Responsibility**

In addition to their common identity and interests as scientists, U.S. and Russian participants bonded over a shared sense of responsibility for nuclear weapons. As Hecker said:

We discovered that we not only shared common scientific bonds, but also the enormous sense of responsibility we had for nuclear weapons. The scientists and engineers of weapons laboratories on both sides considered ourselves the stewards of the nuclear weapons. We conceived them, we designed them, we helped build them, we gave custody to the military, and finally we took them back for disassembly. We had cradle-to-grave responsibility for the weapons and could not rest until they were dismantled.

Participants could collaboratively act on this shared sense of responsibility thanks to two essential conditions.

First, sustained interaction between scientists created a cache of mutual trust and understanding that allowed specialists to be comfortable jointly addressing more sensitive issues directly related to their nuclear weapons responsibilities. Such issues predominantly related to the Russian side, which had enormous challenges with outdated infrastructure, safeguarding materials, disassembling retired warheads, and downsizing production facilities—all with insufficient funding. Because of the



connections and trust between labs, scientists were able to frame these problems as global issues of public safety and nonproliferation, not just problems for Russia. The lab-to-lab connections triggered a sense of responsibility that extended beyond nationally-bound interests for both sides, which allowed them to transcend initial concerns or suspicions about the other side's motives.

Second, no efforts of any consequence would have been possible without the approval of Washington and Moscow. Throughout the years of lab-to-lab activities, scientists on both sides proposed, advised, pushed, and persuaded their respective governments to favor policies that advanced lab-to-lab activities. At the same time, collectively and individually, they invariably obeyed the discipline of their national security missions, which was the most deeply ingrained element of their professional identities. Several lab-to-lab participants on both sides voiced the identical view that in any interaction, it was never difficult to observe the secrecy requirements: "We always knew where the boundary was." In this sense, the lab-to-lab experience proved rewarding because it aligned the chance to work with a former adversary for a meaningful cause in sync with a deeply internalized loyalty to one's original mission.

### **In Need of Vision and Common Sense**

The success of U.S.-Russia lab-to-lab cooperation is perhaps best captured by LANL veteran Paul White, who noted "the power that's unlocked by not having fences," in other words, removing the barriers for collaboration. The necessary enabling condition was the fortunate circumstance that both the U.S. and Russian governments, each for their own reasons, had the vision to support lab-to-lab connections. For a time, and to a certain extent, both governments even accepted the shared advice of the experts.

More of this is needed. Not only should we look forward to a time when cooperation between nuclear laboratories can again be supported, lessons from this approach could very well be applied to other areas in the U.S.-Russia relationship.

### **III. Russia and the Word**



# The Soviet Roots of Meddling in U.S. Politics

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 452

January 2017

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The release on January 6 of an [unclassified version](#) of the U.S. Intelligence Community's report describing efforts by Russian security services to influence last year's U.S. presidential campaign in favor of Donald Trump evoked a sense of déjà vu. Despite the advent of cyberwarfare, the Russian government's attempts to sway the U.S. election in 2016 were strikingly reminiscent of Soviet "active measures" during the Cold War.

The Intelligence Community report says that Russia's use of cyberwarfare and other tactics in 2016 was "the most recent expression of Moscow's longstanding desire to undermine the US-led liberal democratic order." This is undoubtedly true, but the report goes on to claim that "these activities demonstrated a significant escalation in directness, level of activity, and scope of effort compared to previous operations." This sweeping characterization is toned down later in the report, but only slightly. The notion that Russian intelligence services' actions in 2016 were unprecedented in scale reflects an inadequate understanding of the historical context.

The reality is that the two main Soviet intelligence and security agencies—the KGB and GRU (military intelligence)—kept up a vigorous campaign for several decades to meddle in U.S. politics and discredit the United States. The "active measures" used by the KGB and GRU during the Cold War, including disinformation, forgeries of documents and letters, and the spread of propaganda through sympathetic individuals and front organizations, were remarkably similar to the tactics and goals of Russian intelligence agencies in 2016. Even though the World Wide Web and email did not exist during the Cold War, the basic methods used by the KGB and GRU in 2016 were simply adapted for the cyber age.

## The KGB's "Service A" and How We Know about It

The KGB's First Main Directorate (the foreign intelligence directorate) included a special unit known as Service A, which orchestrated a wide range of mostly non-violent but occasionally violent measures to destabilize the United States and undermine U.S.

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influence in the world. Service A was formed in the 1950s, and it almost immediately set to work spreading disinformation, producing forgeries, transmitting propaganda, and disrupting U.S. and Western public diplomacy.

The large cache of transcribed KGB documents in the Mitrokhin Collection that became accessible in July 2014 at Cambridge University's [Churchill Archives Centre](#)—excerpts of which had earlier been published in two books co-authored by the former KGB archivist Vasili Mitrokhin and the British historian Christopher Andrew—provides detailed evidence of Service A's activities. Other evidence comes from declassified KGB and GRU documents stored in Moscow at the [Russian State Archive of Recent History](#) and the [State Archive of the Russian Federation](#), and from recent memoirs by former KGB officers and Soviet officials.

### **How the Soviet Union Meddled in U.S. Politics**

Among Service A's early operations was an effort to spread disinformation that supposedly linked the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to President John F. Kennedy's assassination. The KGB funded the publication of conspiracy-mongering books by Western authors and forged documents and letters that tied the assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, to the CIA and FBI. The Mitrokhin files indicate that Service A also surreptitiously provided funding to the American lawyer Mark Lane, whose scurrilous books about the Kennedy assassination, starting with *Rush to Judgment* in 1966, became a staple among conspiracy theorists. Even though Lane was probably unaware that financial support for his "research" was coming from the KGB, his work was warmly endorsed by the Soviet press. Lane's writings about the assassination have been thoroughly debunked and discredited, but they are still cited in some quarters to this day.

On other issues as well, disinformation and forgeries spread by Service A are still accepted by a surprisingly large number of people in the West. The KGB, working with the notorious East German State Security Ministry, widely disseminated the falsehood that the AIDS epidemic was started by U.S. government experiments at the Fort Detrick biological warfare defense laboratory in Maryland. Service A worked with the Cuban intelligence service to provide both real and forged CIA documents to Philip Agee, a renegade former CIA officer, who published the materials in books and newsletters as evidence of CIA "crimes."

Service A interfered more directly in U.S. politics when it sought to discredit high-ranking U.S. officials such as Lyndon Johnson and J. Edgar Hoover and prominent individuals outside the government, notably Martin Luther King. Service A disseminated forged documents supposedly showing links between Hoover and the far-right John Birch Society and Ku Klux Klan and tying Hoover to various illegal actions.

To be sure, the FBI under Hoover did engage in some illegal operations, but the allegations promoted by the KGB were either false or wildly exaggerated.

On a more sinister note, Service A forged homophobic letters to the editor of U.S. newspapers claiming that Hoover was a gay transvestite who was seeking to establish a “network of like-minded homosexuals” within the FBI. These baseless allegations continue to enjoy credence in some circles in the United States even now.

Martin Luther King came under attack from the KGB in part because he declined to embrace a Communist agenda for the civil rights movement (even though one of his chief associates, Stanley Levison, was a Communist) and in part because his hard-won achievements threatened one of Service A’s main selling points. The entrenchment of racial segregation and racial discrimination in the United States during the first two decades of the Cold War had been a severe burden on U.S. foreign policy, belying the U.S. government’s claims to be promoting democracy and human rights. It was for this reason that many U.S. State Department officials came to support the civil rights movement, sensing that an end to segregation would improve America’s image abroad.

For the KGB, the calculus was the opposite. Soviet propaganda had long highlighted the iniquities of racial discrimination in the United States, and Soviet officials were well aware of the potency of this issue in tarnishing U.S. leadership in the world. Congressional passage of civil rights legislation, the KGB feared, would eliminate one of the Soviet Union’s major lines of attack. Officials in Service A became increasingly worried about the success of King and the civil rights movement and set out to discredit them. KGB officials used forgeries to depict King and other civil rights activists as “Uncle Toms” who were secretly colluding with the government. Service A also fabricated documents and spread disinformation that President Johnson had taken secret steps with King’s implicit approval to ensure the continued subordination of blacks.

In later years, the KGB tried to stir up racial tensions in New York City by sending inflammatory forged publications to black activist groups and by setting off a bomb in a “Negro section of New York” and blaming it on the militant Jewish Defense League. Service A resorted to similar provocations throughout the 1970s and well into the 1980s, viewing race relations as the issue most likely to destabilize the U.S. political system and divide American society.

### **Soviet Efforts to Influence U.S. Presidential Elections**

In at least two cases, the Soviet Union secretly tried to influence U.S. presidential elections. In 1968, the Soviet Politburo strongly favored the Democratic candidate, Hubert Humphrey, out of fear that the Republican nominee, Richard Nixon, who had been known as a vehement anti-Communist in the 1950s, would take a harsh stance

against the Soviet Union. Soviet leaders ordered their ambassador in Washington, DC, Anatoly Dobrynin, to approach Humphrey with an offer of clandestine funding for his campaign. When Dobrynin raised the matter with Humphrey, the latter immediately turned it down. Nixon ended up winning, but instead of confronting the Soviet Union, he embarked on a broad *détente*, much to Moscow's relief. Soviet officials heartily welcomed Nixon's reelection in 1972 and were dismayed when he was forced to resign in 1974.

In 1976, the Soviet Union again secretly adopted measures to influence a U.S. presidential election. Early in the year, the KGB warned the Soviet Politburo that Senator Henry ("Scoop") Jackson, known for his fierce opposition to the Soviet Union, stood a good chance of gaining the Democratic nomination. Jackson's victories in the Massachusetts and New York primary elections heightened these concerns. Service A prepared a wide-ranging set of measures to discredit Jackson, especially by falsely portraying him as a homosexual. The KGB sent forged FBI letters to leading U.S. newspapers and journalists claiming that Jackson was a closeted gay. Even after Jackson's campaign faltered and he dropped out of the 1976 race, Service A kept up its homophobic war of disinformation against him, hoping to prevent him from ever again becoming a viable presidential candidate.

In 1983, amid severe tensions in U.S.-Soviet relations, the KGB proposed measures to try to undermine Ronald Reagan's position in the 1984 U.S. election. But the proposal never got very far because the prolonged illness and eventual death of the Soviet leader Yuri Andropov meant that a wide range of steps were put on hold. Moreover, by 1984 the cables coming in from Ambassador Dobrynin left little doubt that Reagan was going to win in a landslide no matter what the Soviet Union did—a prediction that was amply borne out.

### **Russian Meddling Today: New Technology, Same Activity**

Service A's active measures to influence U.S. politics and undermine the role of the United States in the world persisted until the final years of the Soviet regime. As late as 1991, KGB-inspired disinformation and forgeries continued to circulate. Throughout this time, the chief aim of the KGB and GRU was to "undermine the US-led liberal democratic order," the same goal that is now being attributed to the Russian intelligence services.

After the Soviet Union disintegrated, Moscow's active measures against the United States abated, but only for a while. The basic problem was that neither the KGB nor the GRU was ever dissolved. The KGB's main components were simply renamed, eventually becoming known as the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). The GRU was not even renamed. Instead, it continued to function intact under its Soviet name.

After Vladimir Putin, a former KGB officer who is immensely proud of the sixteen years he worked for the agency, replaced Boris Yeltsin as Russian president at the end of 1999, the FSB, SVR, and GRU gradually revived the intensity of their active measures against the United States and its allies. Over the past five years, as Putin has increased his anti-Western hostility and xenophobic nationalism, Russian intelligence services have taken the opportunity to return to a Cold War-era scale of actions to interfere in U.S. politics and undermine U.S. global influence. Technology has changed, but little else has. Anyone who wants to understand the Putin administration's attempts to influence the U.S. presidential election in 2016 should closely study what the KGB did over and over during the Cold War.

The success of the United States in withstanding the KGB's "active measures" and emerging as the world's preeminent power after the Soviet Union disintegrated was attained only by vigilance and a determination to safeguard democratic values and procedures. Much the same will be needed nowadays to ward off the challenge from the Russian intelligence services. All previous U.S. presidents took the issue seriously and pursued appropriate countermeasures, and one hopes that the same will be true of Donald Trump.





# How and Why the United States and Russia Can Cooperate on Terrorism

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 450  
November 2016

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Disagreements between Russia and the United States on how to counter violent extremism and terrorism are long-term and objective in nature. These stem from fundamentally different political systems, cultures, values, historical experiences, national interests, and global roles that are unlikely to disappear anytime soon. However, even as bilateral relations have deteriorated sharply since 2014 between the United States and Russia, these two countries have experienced increasing convergence in the types of terrorist challenges they face, the overall levels of threat terrorism poses to their homelands, and the contexts in which each country operates when countering terrorism and violent extremism. Not only is there a mutual interest in addressing violent extremism in Syria/Iraq and Afghanistan, but new ways have emerged to share good practices for combating homegrown extremism and radicalization.

## Comparative Threats from Violent Extremism

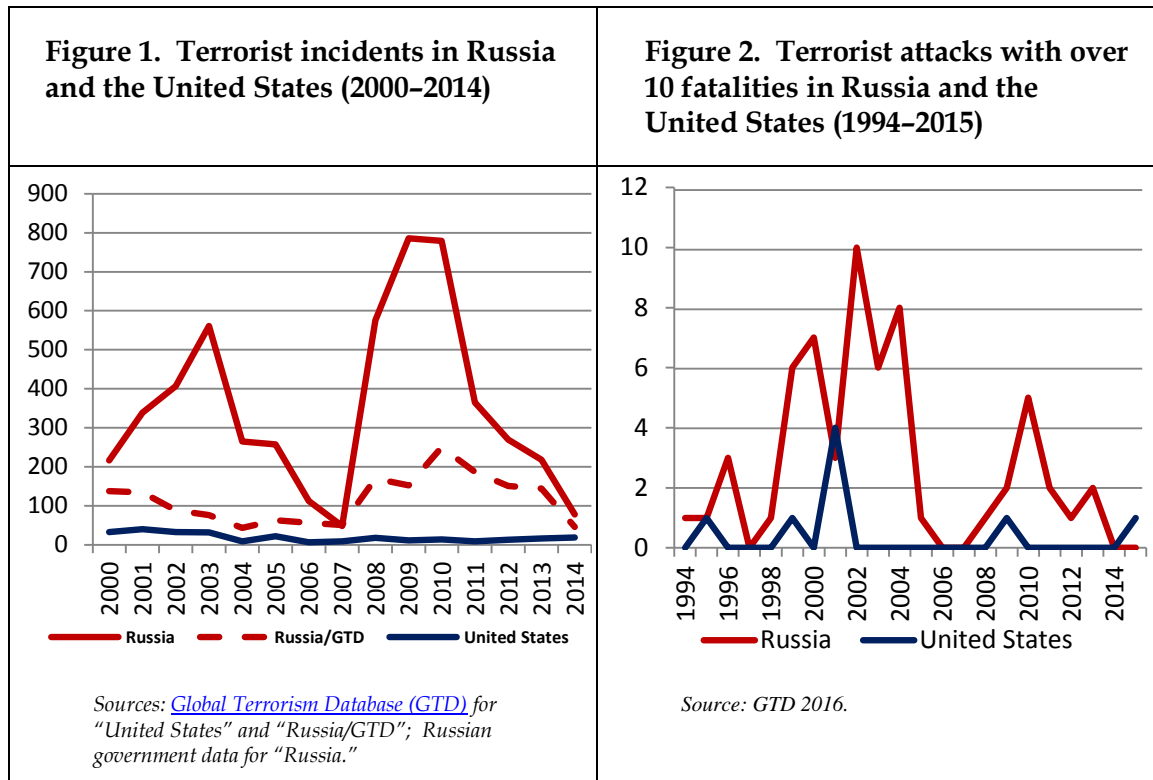
The threats posed to Russia and the United States by violent extremism and terrorism differ in type, scale, drivers, and radicalization paths. For the first quarter century after the end of the Cold War, Russia was more systematically and heavily affected by terrorism at home than was the United States (see **Figures 1** and **2**). This is primarily because the Islamist/separatist insurgencies in the North Caucasus have employed terrorism as one of their main tactics.

During the same period, the United States homeland has had limited exposure to terrorism (if one excludes the notable “outlier” of the 9/11 attacks). Throughout the early 21st century, Russia systematically ranked far higher than the United States in the [Global Terrorism Index \(GTI\)](#). For the first decade after 9/11, Russia was in the [top 10](#) (2002-2011) of states “most impacted by terrorism.” It later fell down to [11th](#) place in GTI 2014 (which covered 2000-2013) and [23rd](#) place in GTI 2015 (2000-2014). In contrast, the United States ranked 41<sup>st</sup> during 2002-2011, 30th in GTI 2014, and 35th in GTI 2015. More

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recently, however, the respective levels of terrorist threat to homeland have become increasingly comparable: [according](#) to GTI 2016 (2000-2015), Russia ranked 30<sup>th</sup> and the United States 36<sup>th</sup>. In global perspective, U.S. interests and presence remain the primary foci of transnational terrorist networks, who frequently attack or threaten them abroad. America's overall exposure to international terrorism, as reflected by U.S. [State Department](#) and [Treasury Department](#) terrorist lists, is thus much broader and more global compared to Russia.



Radical Islamist groups strongly dominate both the U.S. and Russian lists of terrorist actors. As of November 2016, 21 of 26 organizations on Russia's [list](#) were Islamist, as were 43 out of 61 on the U.S. State Department's [list](#) of "foreign terrorist organizations." These lists have only minimally overlapped (even as that overlap somewhat increased in the recent years), the result of divergence in the type of terrorist threats each country mainly faces, the scale of interests involved, and differences in global military presence. There have been only two times when the U.S. and Russian lists have overlapped on more than one group in the same region. The first was the overlapping listing of al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban in 2006-2010.\* The second took place in the mid-2010s with the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIS, also referred to as ISIL, IS, and Daesh)

<sup>2</sup> In 2010, the Afghan Taliban was excluded from the U.S. State Department list of "foreign terrorist organizations." Russia's official list of terrorist organizations was first published in July 2006.

and the Al-Nusrah Front (Jabhat an-Nusrah).<sup>\*</sup> Indeed, despite major policy disagreements on Syria and support for opposite sides in the Syrian civil war, it is on the Syria/Iraq context that the U.S. and Russia's antiterrorism agendas overlap most closely.

ISIS in particular, as an ideology and a catalyst for Islamist violent extremism, has posed a domestic and foreign policy challenge to both the United States and Russia. Both countries share concerns about transnational two-way flows of militants. Russia is more heavily and directly affected by this: as of September 2015, only 21 [U.S. citizens](#) had joined ISIS and Jabhat an-Nusrah in Syria and Iraq (43 more Americans planned this or tried, but failed). For reasons ranging from lack of geographical proximity to the generally lower degree of radicalization of American Muslims, the U.S. numbers are miniscule compared to the 2,900 militants from [Russia](#) who fought in Syria and Iraq at the end of 2015. (Of note, 5,000 jihadists joined ISIS from the [EU](#).)

For the United States, the ISIS challenge is a combination of the Iraq quagmire, broader Middle Eastern predicaments, and concerns over ISIS influence and propaganda spurring homegrown violent extremism. Regarding Iraq, ISIS has been seriously undermining its stabilization at a time when the country has been struggling with the aftermath of the U.S. intervention, bad governance, and sectarianism. Regarding the broader Middle East, ISIS has been fueling pan-regional destabilization, catalyzing regional rivalries, impeding a solution to the Syrian crisis, and spawning copycat groupings.

In the 15-year period after 9/11 (through November 2016), [U.S.-based](#) deadly terrorism was dominated by two types of violent actors: right-wing radicals (18 attacks resulting in 48 fatalities) and Islamist extremists (10 attacks resulting in 94 fatalities). While homegrown Islamist terrorism was less frequent than right-wing terrorism, it was 3.5 times more deadly and was gradually increasing in lethality, including accounting for the deadliest attack on U.S. soil since 9/11: the June 2016 Orlando Night Club shooting that killed 46 people. U.S. homegrown Islamist terrorism has been primarily perpetrated by small cells or individuals ("lone wolves") with few, if any, direct links to foreign terrorist organizations. These often do, though, act under the influence of transnational radical ideologies and movements such as al-Qaeda or ISIS.

For Russia, the domestic implications of the ISIS challenge have not been confined to the North Caucasus, including the return of jihadists from Syria and Iraq and pledges of loyalty to ISIS by local militant underground units. Beyond this region, ISIS has catalyzed a new phenomenon of small radicalized homegrown cells or individuals across Russia, but with limited or no direct link to the North Caucasus. While distinct from the North Caucasian insurgency, these actors are increasingly similar to the type of

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<sup>3</sup> As of November 2016, the other seven groups included in both the Russian and U.S. lists were Aum Shinrikyo, al-Qa'ida, Asbat al-Ansar, Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, Islamic Jihad-Jamaat of Mujahideen/Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb.

homegrown violent Islamist extremists faced by the United States, ranging from lone wolves to violent extremist network agents.\* Russia is experiencing increasingly direct parallels to the United States in this type of fragmented homegrown violent extremism, inspired by transnational influences and ideologies. This is an already well-embedded pattern in the West, but a more recent phenomenon for Russia. Also, the decline in Islamist-separatist terrorism and insurgency in the North Caucasus has been paralleled by growing visibility of right-wing extremism in Russia (increasingly directed against migrants). The violent manifestations of this phenomenon have usually come in forms other than terrorism, including scuffles, provocations, ethnic/religious vandalism, pogroms, and disturbances.

### **Comparative Strategies to Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism**

For much of the early 21st century, both American and Russian antiterrorism strategies have been heavily militarized and dominated by the “war on terror” paradigm. The context for these strategies, however, differed radically. Russia waged domestic counterinsurgency campaigns in the North Caucasus while the United States led overseas security involvements ranging from military interventions to stabilization/counterinsurgency operations in failed, weak, and seriously fractured states such as Afghanistan and Iraq. Consequently, Russia’s main antiterrorism “solution” – even if costly and incomplete – has been domestic reliance on traditionalist ethno-religious forces inside Chechnya as a hedge against, and a more manageable alternative to, transnationalized violent Salafist jihadism – at the expense of tolerating autocratic tendencies, a questionable human rights record, and a re-Islamicization agenda. It is only Russia’s campaign in Syria (since 2015) that has displayed at least a *typological similarity* to the US-led coalition operations overseas (against ISIL in Iraq starting in 2014 and then extended to Syria). In both the North Caucasian and the Middle Eastern contexts, the relevance of Russia’s antiterrorism experience to the United States, and vice versa, has been severely limited for ideological reasons. An example would be Washington’s strong emphasis on a democratization agenda in (post)conflict settings, regardless of the context and feasibility, and low tolerance for “dictators fighting extremists” solutions.

In the past few years and to different degrees, both the US and Russia have moved beyond heavily militarized (counter)terrorism-centered strategies and toward approaches that are more comprehensive, though for different reasons that complicate comparison. In the United States, a paradigm shift occurred from the “war on terror” to “[countering violent extremism](#)” (CVE) under the less securitized Obama administration. This move was dictated by mounting problems and the increasingly compromised antiterrorism agenda associated with a) U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, b)

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\* See: Ekaterina Stepanova, [The “Islamic State” as a Security Problem for Russia: the Nature and Scale of the Threat](#), PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 393, October 2015,

international and regional developments such as the Arab Spring, and, to an extent, c) the rise in fragmented homegrown violent extremism in the U.S. homeland. This paradigm shift, at least at the level of U.S. political discourse, has no direct parallel in Russia. Russia's heavily securitized antiterrorism agenda and discourse have not become as controversial or politically compromised. Instead, they remain one of the keys to the success Putin's regime, whose significant public support has been reinforced as the ISIL factor in and beyond the Middle East has sparked fears that transnational Islamist extremism can spread. Thus, the evolution of Russia's approach has not involved a conceptual shift from counterterrorism to CVE. Rather, within its current approach, there is some growing attention being paid to causation and non-military aspects of antiterrorism (political, socio-cultural, and developmental).

Comparative analysis of the American and Russian approaches to CVE reveals two paradoxes. First, despite the (typologically and geographically) narrower character of the main violent extremist threat to post-Soviet Russia (linked to domestic Islamist/separatist insurgency), Russia's definition and interpretation of extremism is far broader than the U.S. notion of "violent extremism." Russia [employs](#) a very broad and blurred category of "extremism" that embraces all internal and external activity, violent and non-violent, anything aimed at "breaking the unity and territorial integrity" or "destabilization of the domestic and social situation." Second, while Russia's territory has been more systematically and heavily affected by terrorism/violent extremism than the U.S. homeland, the United States shows greater interest in CVE-type preventive, counter/de-radicalization, "soft security" initiatives (distinct from coercive law enforcement measures) at home than Russia does.

The two countries' approaches to counterextremism also exemplify fundamental differences in their respective dominant normative/value systems. In advancing counternarratives to those put forth by extremists, the U.S. emphasis is on a *community-based, democratic civil society response* while Russia's is on actively "*promoting ethnoconfessional tolerance*" and "*spiritual, ethical and patriotic values*" traditional to Russian culture.

While these nuances and gaps are important, they should not be absolutized. Nor should one overestimate the American emphasis on CVE. The Obama administration's CVE focus is not likely to be reproduced or prioritized by the Donald Trump administration. Also, in practice, it did not radically affect funding priorities for counterterrorism, nor did it change the U.S. reliance on military/security operations overseas as a way of reducing terrorist threats to the American homeland. Russia may not emphasize domestic CVE the way the United States does, but, in practice, the United States has not excessively emphasized it either. Nor should any conceptual gaps prevent the two countries from sharing good practices in preventing and countering violent extremism, including terrorism, and learning from each other's comparative strengths and weaknesses—especially as the two cases are becoming more comparable, not less.

## Pathways for Cooperation

Since 2014, most institutionalized security mechanisms for U.S.-Russian cooperation on countering terrorism and violent extremism have been cancelled or suspended by the United States in response to Russia's actions vis-a-vis the Ukraine crisis. Halted were the two Working Groups of the Bilateral Presidential Commission, one led by diplomats and the other consisting of senior intelligence officials. The same goes for Russia's cooperation with the United States/West in multilateral security formats such as the NATO-Russia Council or G-8 Counterterrorism Action Group. Some contact and cooperation channels continued, such as low-profile intelligence-sharing between security agencies, and joint work on some UN (and UN-related) initiatives, such as the UN Security Council resolutions [on foreign militants](#) and [terrorism financing in Iraq and Syria](#), and at the Global Counterterrorism Forum.

In a situation when most institutional cooperative frameworks have been cancelled or suspended, and most of them may not even be revivable, there are at least two main directions that the United States and Russia could and should pursue, to mutual benefit, in order to counter terrorism and violent extremism more effectively.

The first direction is to move from the heavy and almost exclusive focus on *counterterrorism* (which was in past cooperative frameworks) toward paying at least as much attention to *countering and preventing violent extremism and radicalization*. The focus on CVE highlights a growing parallel need – as relevant for Russia as it is for the United States – to address challenges posed by homegrown, transnationally-inspired Islamist actors and far-right radical groups. Good practices to be shared in select areas might include youth-centered counter/de-radicalization programs, countering extremists' narratives, degrading extremist abilities to disseminate messages and recruit followers through digital fora/social media.

In terms of learning from each other's respective CVE strengths, the strongest element in the U.S. CVE approach is its heavy emphasis on community-level policing and engaging local communities and civil society. This approach is hardly applicable to Russia, with its anocratic governance, weakened civil society, and vertically centralized domestic security system. Still, the United States has invaluable experience in community-level policing that Russia should closely analyze and selectively implement. This is true both for the more specific purposes of CVE and in the broader context of major institutional reforms for Russia's law enforcement sector.

In turn, Russia's main comparative strength stems from its centuries-long experience in coping with and engaging its core, large native Muslim population (even as Russia also faces the more recent problem of radicalized Muslim migrants). The current American approach to homegrown Islamist radicalization, excessively copying the United Kingdom and EU states, targets populations that are overwhelmingly first and second



generation Muslim migrant diasporas. Not all of the European measures are well tailored to the U.S. case, where Muslims are overall more secular and better integrated into society (as with African-American Muslim communities). Ironically, Russia's experience may actually be of high relevance for the United States on how to avoid "securitizing" large well-integrated domestic Muslim populations (despite heavy security pressures and a harsh stance against fringe Islamist extremists).

The second direction for Russia and the United States to pursue is cooperating actively to solve concrete regional and functional problems of high mutual interest. These range from specific overlapping security matters requiring direct functional/technical contacts and intelligence-sharing to major regional issues of mutual concern, such as with Syria and Afghanistan. Two existing examples of intelligence-sharing include FBI information provided to Russia regarding the 2015 terrorist attack on a Russian charter flight in Egypt and security arrangements for the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

More generally, the United States and Russia are the two powers best poised to keep the global antiterrorism agenda focused on the Iraq-Syria and Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict areas. They could, and should, push for an upgrade of multilateral efforts to advance genuine resolutions to these conflict zones as a long-term global strategy to reduce and prevent terrorism. Both zones involve weak/failed states with intense and heavily transnationalized and regionalized civil wars, and together they account for two thirds of all terrorist activity. Such complex and fragmented regional conflicts require international stakeholders to make hard, context-specific choices. This is especially the case in distinguishing between reconcilable militant actors and irreconcilable transnational violent extremists, and between a radical armed group's evolution toward inclusion in a national political process and its mere rebranding. Solutions, in and beyond Syria, may not be practical or broadly acceptable internationally without joint problem-solving efforts by the United States and Russia. It is these joint problem-solving efforts that could not only help improve US-Russia bilateral relations, but could also be built upon for re-establishing and upgrading more institutionalized cooperative mechanisms.





# The Kremlin's Arctic Plans

## MORE GUTTED THAN GRAND

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 430

June 2016

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Over the past decade, Russia has launched a diplomatic and symbolic offensive in the Arctic, supported by increased military activity, grandiose economic plans, and showy assertions of sovereignty. Russian officials have increasingly portrayed the Arctic as the new frontier of a re-emerging Russia “standing up from its knees.”

Despite grand actions and even grander rhetoric, however, Russia's Arctic adventures are no more than an extension of the Kremlin's efforts to “simulate sovereignty”: the performance of symbolic acts designed to assert Russia's international presence. As with its wars in Ukraine and Syria, Russia's Arctic ventures are exercises intended to boost patriotism at home while keeping up great power appearances abroad.

### A Symbolic Legacy

For centuries, the far north has held a mythological place in the Russian psyche. It is the great frontier: a place of adventure, symbol of territorial grandeur, and source of abundant resources. Russia's Arctic odyssey dates back to early explorations of hunters, prospectors, and Cossacks in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, followed by the geographic discoveries of Vitus Bering and other eighteenth- to twentieth-century explorers. That the Arctic became an essential part of Russia's identity is no surprise. Territoriality has traditionally played a major role in the construction of Russia's political community and serves as one of the key markers of Russian statehood.

The Arctic's symbolic significance and promise tend to prevail over any practical aspects. It has encompassed great geographic discoveries, stories of courage and sacrifice, civilizational outposts, but these represent historic lore, not economic gain. For a long while, Russians took pride in possessing the Arctic's immense emptiness, and they have never been able to extract substantial material benefit from it. Russia's far north differs from Siberia, which in the colonial past was a rich source of trade goods

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(such as fur). Russia's Arctic regions provide fish, whale, walrus, and the like, but these have always been of regional rather than national significance.

The Soviet Union embarked on a major Arctic development program in the 1920s to the 1960s, and followed this up with large-scale oil and gas development. During the Cold War, the Soviet state also constructed extensive military infrastructure, including submarine bases, airfields, and radar stations.

Since the late years of the USSR, however, and especially since its demise, the significance and scope of Russian Arctic development has dramatically declined. The region began losing its military and strategic significance, which resulted in a drastic cut in funding and support for Arctic infrastructure. Military installations and mining facilities were abandoned, while towns and villages decayed. By the turn of the century, the Russian Arctic had become a giant frozen monument to [failed modernization](#).

### **Rediscovering the Arctic**

An upsurge in interest in the Arctic has occurred under Vladimir Putin. Under his watch, Russia has issued several policy documents prioritizing the Arctic. These include the 2008 Arctic Strategy, 2009 National Security Strategy, and a revised 2014 Military Doctrine tasking Russia's armed forces with "ensuring the national interests of the Russian Federation in the Arctic." A [revised Maritime Doctrine](#), approved by Putin in July 2015, also places great emphasis on protecting Russian interests in the Arctic.

The key to Russia's Arctic policy involves a legal claim concerning the demarcation of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) boundaries, the delimitation of the continental shelf, and vessel transit in the Arctic. Moscow's claim, originally submitted in 2001 and revised in February 2016, includes the Lomonosov and Mendeleev Ridges, which run toward the North Pole, the Sea of Okhotsk, and parts of the Barents and Bering Seas, roughly 1.2 million square kilometers in all. Citing a lack of sufficient data, the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) rejected Russia's initial claim in 2002. Since then, Moscow has prioritized gathering academic and scientific evidence to support its [claims](#) to both an extended EEZ in the Arctic Ocean and the Northern Sea Route. Russia's claims to an extended EEZ overlap with claims made by Denmark, Canada, and the United States, meaning that for certain contested issues, the Lomonosov and Mendeleev claims in particular, resolution may be years away.

The Kremlin views the Arctic as its greatest resource base for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is particularly intent on developing new oil fields on the continental shelf. The *Prirazlomnaya* oil platform that was targeted by Greenpeace was supposed to be a showcase of this effort. Moreover, as global warming proceeds and the Arctic ice melts, Russian officials hope for the development of a Northern Sea Route (*Sevmorput'*) that

will serve as an alternative shipping route between East Asia and Europe, cutting the traditional route via the Suez Canal by almost two weeks.

The Russian leadership also strongly believes in the security importance of the Arctic, as a future arena for major resource competition and even [terrorist attacks](#). This idea, largely [promoted](#) by top security officials like Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev and FSB head Alexander Bortnikov, has led to support for increasing Russia's military presence in the Arctic. This involves constructing new military bases and preparing the newly-created Arctic Brigade for deployment to any desolate northern shores. By 2018, Russia's armed forces plan to construct new military bases on Cape Schmidt and the Kuril Islands, to support their existing base on Kotelny Island, and they also intend to [double](#) their military contingent on the Novaya Zemlya archipelago. These installations will form the infrastructure of a future Arctic Group of Forces.

### The Arctic as a Symbolic Resource

In spite of these economic and military motivations, Russia's Arctic policy remains mostly about symbolism. Putin's outlook does not focus on geographic discovery and the expansion of Russia's realm, as in imperial times, or reflect the Soviet Modernist zeal to inhabit and cultivate barren lands. For Putin, the Arctic is about restoring Russia's great power status (*derzhavnost'*\*) and coping with its overwhelming post-imperial *ressentiment* (resentment).

This is in line with the full array of Kremlin strategies and maneuvers of the last fifteen years that involve re-playing the end of the Cold War and healing the wounds of Soviet breakup. The Arctic fits this framework as a key arena to flex its military muscle, underline its resurgence as a great power, challenge international actors on the Arctic front, and ultimately return Russia to the "grand chessboard" of geopolitics.

Three symbolic episodes exemplify this symbolic approach to the Arctic. The first was the *Arktika 2007* expedition, under the command of renowned Russian polar explorer and parliamentary deputy Artur Chilingarov, who planted a titanium Russian flag on the seabed of the North Pole. The August 2007 expedition was originally to be an international scientific adventure, but the Kremlin turned it into a part of its quest to substantiate its claim that the North Pole is an extension of Russia's continental shelf. After the expedition, the government argued that seabed samples indicated that Russia's Lomonosov ridge extends all the way to the North Pole.

A second episode was the September 2013 Arctic clash with Greenpeace. Activists on the boat *Arctic Sunrise* tried to board the Russian oil platform *Prirazlomnaya* in protest

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\* Roi, Michael L. "Russia: The Greatest Arctic Power?" *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 23.4 (2010), p. 558.

against oil drilling in the Arctic. Russia responded fiercely to this trespassing within its 200-mile exclusive economic zone. The ship was boarded by Russian commandos, and all crew members were arrested and charged with piracy.\*

A third symbolic display of Russian sovereignty in the Arctic occurred the following month in the run-up to the Sochi Winter Olympics. The Olympic Torch, on its longest relay ever (including to space), was taken to the North Pole on a nuclear-powered icebreaker.

### **Russia's Arctic Ambitions: Dead in the Water?**

By 2016, Moscow's grand Arctic plans had largely been shattered. First came the setback from the natural resource sector. The double blow of Western sanctions and lower oil prices meant that Russia could not secure the technology or know-how for Arctic oil drilling while losing the economic rationale for doing so; at the currently low (and supposedly lasting) prices, Arctic oil production is simply not profitable. In late September 2015, Royal Dutch Shell announced its withdrawal from Arctic projects in Russia, following a [similar move](#) by Exxon Mobil, Chevron, and BP. Russian oil companies have been left alone, with little available credit, no technology, and dim economic prospects.

Likewise, the Northern Sea Route has turned out to be [commercially unviable](#). As Pavel Baev has [observed](#), "old Soviet infrastructure along the *Sevmorput*" is so rotten that navigation in the difficult northern waters remains too risky. Egypt, in the meantime, has swiftly constructed the New Suez Canal, which offers a far more reliable route for tanker and container traffic" from East Asia to Europe.

Finally, as Baev again notes, the Russian claim for the expansion of its continental shelf faces competing ones from Denmark and Canada. The Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf "cannot make a recommendation on competing claims unless parties agree on a compromise."

All this leaves Russia with the solely symbolic rationale of boosting patriotism at home while keeping up great power appearances abroad.

### **Conclusion**

Once again, as so often in the past, the Russian Arctic stands as an empty space that the state utilizes for symbolic exercises of sovereignty. It is a locus for identity construction and the territorialization of the national myth, evoking stories of sacrifice and national

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\* The crew was released in December 2013 and the ship was released in June 2014. In August 2015, the Court of Arbitration in The Hague ordered Russia to pay damages to the Netherlands over the seizure of the crew and ship.

greatness. Putin skillfully utilizes this traditional rhetorical for national consolidation and power projection.

As political scientist Cynthia Weber has [observed](#), “[I]t is no longer sufficient to ask ‘how is sovereignty represented?’ International relations scholars must move on to another question, ‘how is sovereignty simulated?’” This is relevant not only for understanding Russia’s Arctic policy, but also its actions in Ukraine and Syria. These have also been efforts to bolster national sovereignty through symbolic interventions—a proxy war in which Russian involvement was never officially acknowledged followed by a hi-tech air war in the Middle East. Russia’s symbolic expansion to the Arctic is yet another simulation of sovereignty, a symbolic exercise in diplomatic activity, territorial claims, and military buildup to fend off a non-existent enemy (except a boatful of Greenpeace activists).

In sum, Russia’s “fight for the Arctic” is a discursive decoy, yet another “Potemkin village” for which Russia has always been famous.



# Tensions with Russia Heat up the Melting Arctic

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 464

March 2017

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In a 1987 speech in Murmansk, Mikhail Gorbachev famously called for the Arctic to become a “zone of peace.” Since the end of the Cold War, Arctic states largely succeeded in insulating the Far North from tensions in great power relations. However, the crisis between Russia and the West since the onset of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 threatens to disturb the Arctic peace at a time when cooperation is all the more urgent due to growing challenges to the region from climate change.

Among Arctic states and in northern Europe more generally, fear of Russian aggression has overtaken earlier concerns about a race for Arctic resources. Despite eye-catching stunts in recent years like the annual landings since 2014 of Russian [paratroopers](#) on the ice near the North Pole, the increasing concern about Russian intentions has little to do with Russian territorial claims in the Arctic; rather, the overlap between Arctic and Baltic military deployments by Russia and NATO alike threatens to conflate Arctic and Baltic security concerns. But the spillover of security problems on NATO’s peripheries to the Arctic will do little to resolve the region’s real issues, which are primarily environmental threats and human security, particularly to indigenous communities. What is needed in the Arctic is a confidence-building mechanism that will ensure that out-of-area issues do not erode two decades of cooperative interactions. NATO also needs to articulate a clear position on Arctic security so as to avoid carrying over tensions with Russia in the Baltics to the Arctic.

## Russia’s Arctic Ambitions

There is no question that Russia considers the development of the Arctic as a strategic priority. Russian President Vladimir Putin [stated](#) in 2014 that the Arctic represents “a concentration of practically all aspects of national security – military, political, economic, technological, environmental, and that of resources.” Russia is the largest polar state, with an Arctic coastline of more than 4,000 miles. Much of Russia’s energy and mineral wealth lies untapped in its Arctic regions. The acceleration of climate change has opened the possibility of commercial shipping along the Northern Sea Route, over which Russia

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claims sovereignty. After a Russian submarine crew dramatically planted a flag on the Arctic seabed in 2007, doubts first arose about Russia's intentions in the region. More recently, in February 2016, the Russian government revised its [claim](#) to the United Nations to 1.2 million square kilometers of the Arctic seabed, including the shelf beneath the North Pole.\*

### Claiming the Arctic

Russia has filed a revised claim with the UN for disputed territory



In the past decade, Russia has issued a series of strategy documents about the Arctic and explained how the region fits in its military and maritime doctrines. In recent years, Russia also has been highlighting its Arctic ambitions by establishing a new Arctic Command, building up its Arctic forces, developing new bases in the region, reopening Soviet era installations, conducting military exercises, and engaging in frequent submarine patrols in the region.

Some Western observers [warn](#) of Russia's quest for supremacy in the Arctic and urge the U.S. government to close the "icebreaker gap." Although it is true that Russia has a ten to one advantage in this area—about forty operational icebreakers compared to four for the United States—it also has a much more extensive Arctic coastline to service. Moreover, as a result of oil and gas development in the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous

\* See: Sergei Medvedev, "[The Kremlin's Arctic Plans: More Gutted than Grand](#)," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 430, June 2016.

Okrug where 90 percent of Russia's energy resources are located, the population there has [grown](#) to 530,000 in 2016, despite population decline elsewhere in the Russian Arctic. By comparison, there are just 27,827 people in Alaska's Northern Economic Region. Despite Russian superior icebreaker capability, other experts [point](#) to the inadequate infrastructure in the Russian Arctic and constraints on access to needed financing given the low price of oil and economic sanctions. This has raised questions about the purpose of Russia's Arctic ambitions.

Is Russia's Arctic policy today more about symbolism than substance?\* Valery Konyshev and Alexander Sergunin [contend](#) that Russia's Arctic policy today is much different from the Cold War era of global confrontation and is focused instead on demonstrating Russian status as a great power, protecting its economic interests in the Far North, and safeguarding what is claimed as the Russian exclusive economic zone. Nonetheless, they [acknowledge](#) that Russian policy is both assertive in promoting sovereignty claims, inward-looking in acknowledging that Russia's Arctic role will depend on the resolution of domestic economic problems, and seeking soft power through international cooperation.

### How is NATO in the Equation?

Although the July 2016 NATO summit did not [mention](#) the Arctic specifically, the final communiqué spoke of "an arc of instability along NATO's periphery and beyond" and noted that:

"Russia's aggressive actions, including provocative military activities in the periphery of NATO territory, and its demonstrated willingness to attain political goals by the threat and use of force, are a source of regional instability, fundamentally challenge the Alliance, have damaged Euro-Atlantic security, and threaten our long-standing goal of a Europe whole, free, and at peace."

Five out of seven members of the Arctic Council, the primary governance forum for the region—the United States, Canada, Iceland, Denmark, and Norway—are also NATO members. Finland and Sweden, members of the Arctic Council but not of NATO, have increased their level of cooperation with the Alliance in response to provocative Russian military exercises near their territory since 2014 and have been reexamining their security posture, including their relationship with NATO.

Before the Russian intervention in Ukraine, NATO was opposed to building up military capabilities in the Arctic and encouraged regional cooperation. In the current political climate, however, the perception of an increased Russian threat to the region provides a

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\* See: Marlene Laruelle, [Russia's Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North](#) (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe), 2014.

rationale for enhancing military preparedness in the High North. In March 2016, the Arctic Ice Exercise (ICEX) led by the U.S. Navy with the participation of British, Canadian, and Norwegian forces served to reassure NATO allies, particularly in the Baltics. While the exercise was scheduled prior to the Russian takeover of Crimea, and the Navy denied it was planned with Russia in mind, maneuvers included a simulated torpedo firing against a simulated Akula class Russian sub.

Russian analysts contend that their country's naval and air forces in the Arctic are inferior to NATO forces and claim that Russia has actually scaled back its Arctic military presence compared to the Soviet era. A classic security dilemma appears to be unfolding, in that Russia interprets the actions the United States and NATO have taken to enhance their own security in the Arctic as threatening, leading to an expansion of military capabilities, which make the United States and its allies even more alarmed. Even prior to the conflict in Ukraine, Russian officials [criticized](#) what they viewed as NATO's militarization of the Arctic. The appointment of Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's former representative to the NATO-Russia Council and a critic of the organization, to head the Russian Presidential Commission on the Arctic established in 2015, only serves to further blur the boundaries between Russia's relations with NATO and its Arctic security concerns.

### **Post-Cold War Scientific Cooperation in the Arctic**

Meanwhile, far from international scrutiny, US-Russia scientific cooperation in the Arctic continues to move forward. In the final years of the Cold War period, a desire for scientific collaboration and environmental protection in the Arctic led to initiatives which culminated in the creation of the Arctic Council in 1996. The intergovernmental forum's founding agreement, the Ottawa Declaration, specifically omits security issues from the Arctic Council's purview in an effort to focus on environmental, scientific, and economic cooperation priorities. U.S. and Russian scientists have been [cooperating](#) in this area both within the framework of the Arctic Council and outside it for many years and continue to do so despite political tensions. Joint efforts include:

- Preventing unregulated fishing in the high seas through expert meetings that the United States hopes will culminate in a binding treaty.
- Environmental monitoring at the Tiksi International Hydrometeorological Observatory in Russia's Sakha Republic, a joint effort by the United States, Russia, and Finland.
- Collaboration with Russia's Northeast Science Station in Chersky in the Sakha Republic, which regularly hosts foreign scientists and [student exchanges](#) through the Polaris Project, an initiative launched by the Woods Hole Research Center in the United States in 2008.

- Joint oceanographic research through the Distributed Biological Observatory, a joint effort by the United States, Russia, China, Japan, South Korea, and Canada to pool data from measurements obtained near the Bering Strait.
- Joint U.S.-Russian efforts to track fish life in the Chukchi Sea through the Russian-American Long-Term Census of the Arctic.

One week after the July 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw highlighted East-West tensions, the Arctic Council Scientific Task force succeeded in reaching a binding agreement on scientific cooperation—only the third binding treaty ever reached by the Arctic Council since its formation in 1996—that will be signed at the next ministerial meeting of the Arctic Council, in Fairbanks, Alaska in May 2017. The United States, Russia, and Sweden co-chair the Scientific Task Force of the Arctic Council, created in March 2013 to enhance scientific cooperation among Arctic states.

Despite these achievements, U.S.-Russian tensions over the conflict in Ukraine have been felt as far away as the Arctic. Funding for some joint Arctic programs was [cancelled](#) after the Russian takeover of Crimea. For example, the State Department refused to fund a US-Russia conference on natural disasters scheduled to take place in Alaska in 2014. Russian representatives were denied visas to two experts meetings in Canada in 2014 to set up an Arctic Coast Guard forum. Moreover, Putin's restrictions on the activities of U.S. foundations and NGOs in Russia have complicated cooperative efforts between international and Russian NGOs. In 2015, however, Russia was one of the eight Arctic countries participating in the 2015 founding meeting of the [Arctic Coast Guard Forum](#) and Russia continues to cooperate with U.S. (and Norwegian) coast guards.

### **Avoiding Arctic Security Dilemmas**

Recognizing the potential for security dilemmas to increase, U.S. officials involved in Arctic affairs have sought to insulate the region from current tensions in US-Russia relations. In testimony to Congress in November 2015, Admiral Robert J. Papp, then the U.S. Special Representative for the Arctic, urged policymakers to put current tensions with Russia in a broader context and called attention to the longer record of cooperation between the United States and other countries with Russia in the Arctic. A 2015 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office noted that the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) saw a low level of threat in the Arctic and found regional states largely willing to cooperate. Consequently, the DOD saw its role as largely supportive of the missions of other agencies, such as the Coast Guard's role in Search and Rescue. In fact, the 2013 DOD Arctic strategy specifically warned against a militarization of disputes over fishing rights or sovereignty issues in the Arctic, lest it lead to arms races and undermine regional cooperation. Nonetheless, recent US-Russia tensions in the Arctic have provided support for an expansion of U.S. Arctic capabilities, including the

commissioning of a new nuclear icebreaker and upgrading the U.S. Navy aircraft hangar at the Keflavik base in Iceland, as well as justifying a reprieve for expected cuts in the only cold weather brigade in the U.S. Army.

Because the Arctic Council is prohibited from discussing international security issues, this task has fallen to European security institutions, such as the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable (co-hosted by the United States and Norway) and the Northern Chiefs of Defense conference. However, the latter has not met for three years due to Russian actions in Ukraine and Russia has not been attending the former. Some analysts have [called](#) for a formal NATO role in the Arctic and the development of a NATO Arctic strategy, but this will only generate NATO-Russian Arctic tensions instead of addressing the region's concerns. What is needed instead is an Arctic framework for discussing security issues and regional confidence-building initiatives.

Other experts have [suggested](#) broadening the focus of the Arctic Council to accommodate such discussions. A new organization could also be created with a broader-based membership, including observer states that would be non-NATO states. This could be modeled on the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which brings together ASEAN states plus interested great powers and other states outside the region. Although Russia participates in the ARF, it is unlikely to support a new broader framework for the discussion of Arctic issues. For example, Russian officials have been cool to expanding the ranks of observer states in the Arctic Council, putting the European Union's bid on hold.

Confidence-building [measures](#) also could be elaborated multilaterally or bilaterally and address issues such as advance notification of military deployments or restrictions on military movements in particular areas. In a 2016 report for the Russian International Affairs Council, for example, MGIMO Professor Andrei Zagorski called for [Track II discussions](#) on Arctic security issues to improve transparency at a time when most military-to-military dialogues have been suspended between the United States and Russia.

# Turkey and Russia, Erdoğan and Putin

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 444

October 2016

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By the summer of 2016, it had become relatively commonplace in Western policy circles to wonder if Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was following in the footsteps of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and, if so, how far down that path he would take Turkey. The failed coup attempt in Turkey on July 15 changed many dynamics within Turkey in unpredictable ways. Many questions that have been raised can now be answered more definitively. In the Turkish leadership's race toward full-blown authoritarianism, the country has now caught up with Putin, even surpassing the Russian regime on many measures.

## The Coup

The botched coup attempt seemingly came out of nowhere and was indiscriminate in its violence. Fighter jets terrorized Ankara and Istanbul through the night. The parliament building and several other sites were bombed, a first in Turkish history.<sup>†</sup> Like his Russian counterpart, the Turkish president has the ability to turn almost any political crisis to his advantage. The narrative he pushed immediately after the coup started was that followers of Fethullah Gülen in the army were the perpetrators.<sup>‡</sup> This storyline is still the orthodoxy in Turkey. Gülen is a Muslim cleric who lives in exile in Pennsylvania and heads a global movement (or a cult, according to some) that includes a network of schools and businesses. Gülen and Erdoğan were close allies until 2013. It is partly because of this former alliance that many Turks, even those who typically oppose Erdoğan, find the accusations of large-scale infiltration of state institutions by Gülenists very credible, and have rallied behind Erdoğan.<sup>§</sup>

The great gap between Western and Turkish perceptions of what happened (and is happening) in Turkey caused anti-Western sentiments to surface among large segments

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† For more about the coup attempt, see Ayşe Zarakol, "[The Failed Coup Attempt in Turkey: What We Know So Far](#)," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 433, July 2016.

‡ Many of the arrested officers are known to be Gülenists and some have confessed, but it is not clear who else was involved.

§ For more about this dynamic, see Ayşe Zarakol, "[Turkey through the Looking Glass](#)," London Review of Books blog, August 3, 2016.

of the public. Given that in the preceding months there was no anticipation of the coup and no build-up of support for such an intervention (unlike previous coups in Turkish history), the first reaction of the Turkish public was shock. Once the extent of the civilian casualties and the damage from the aerial bombings became clear, societal trauma followed. Erdoğan deftly exploited the situation. He cast Western powers as enemies of the Turkish people, practically accusing the United States of sponsoring the coup, and began to neuter the Turkish opposition.

### **The Counter-Coup**

On July 18, a three-month state of emergency was declared that gave Erdoğan the power to issue emergency decrees. In October, the state of emergency was extended for another three months. These are some of the measures Erdoğan pushed through, with no legal recourse for those affected:

- Thousands of institutions and businesses associated with Gülenists (and others) were shut down. The land, buildings, and other property of these institutions were transferred to the state.
- The military was reorganized. The army, navy, and air force were brought under the authority of the Ministry of National Defense.\* The gendarme and the coast guard were placed under the authority of the Ministry of Interior and separated from the military chain of command. Thousands of military personnel were dishonorably discharged.
- A broad purge began at all state institutions. Tens of thousands were detained and/or arrested with tens of thousands more fired from state jobs, including many teachers. (A large number of the purged were not associated with the Gülenist movement, but rather with particular teachers unions.) All university deans were forced to resign and thousands of academics came under investigation.
- Numerous independent media organizations, including television outlets, were shut down. Many journalists were arrested, with some facing charges as far-fetched as having supported the coup via “subliminal messages.”

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\* They were previously under the authority of the Chief-of-Staff, who was technically under the authority of the president; they functioned relatively autonomously as a result. Without the de facto powers bestowed upon the presidency by the state of emergency, the office is mostly ceremonial, at least under the current constitution.



At least initially, these measures enjoyed broad support from the Turkish public. Because of the trauma of the coup, they were generally fine with the collective punishment of the Gülenists. The Turkish people's bunker-like mentality and their heightened distrust of foreigners in the wake of the coup bears striking resemblance to the kind of attitudes observed among Russians during the Crimea crisis.

In the month after the coup, Erdoğan successfully neutralized the Kemalist opposition by holding a mass rally for "Democracy and Martyrs" on August 7 that deployed all the Turkish symbols of nationalism, even those traditionally associated with Kemalism. The most prominent opposition leaders (with the exception of those from the pro-Kurdish HDP) felt compelled to attend and since then have found it difficult, if not impossible, to challenge the new "national consensus," which equates Erdoğan's well-being with that of the nation and democracy. Since the coup attempt, Erdoğan has also used other aspects of Kemalism as a legitimizing precedent, particularly its paranoid vein about "enemies of the state," both domestic and foreign. Now, when Erdoğan denounces the West, he is able to mobilize support not only from his own base but from the Kemalist opposition as well. These accusations fit nicely with older Kemalist readings of World War I, which point to the West as always conspiring to undermine Turkish independence and which caused the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, Erdoğan and his followers are calling the current situation the "New Independence War," drawing a parallel with Turkey's 1919-1922 "Independence War" when militia forces under Mustafa Kemal fought to establish the Republic of Turkey.

### **Parallels to Russia**

Everything now seems in place for the Turkish government to become a full-blown authoritarian regime. In interviews after the coup, Erdoğan announced that neither the military high command nor the intelligence community warned him of the attempted coup. He first learned about it from his brother-in-law hours after the coup started. The official narrative credits only Erdoğan and the Turkish people with foiling the coup. This juxtapositioning of the leader and "his" masses on the one hand and the disregard of state institutions on the other is a worrying formula reminiscent of twentieth century European fascism.

In a 2012 article, Alexander Motyl [argued](#) that Russia was different from "run-of-the-mill authoritarian states." He noted that it combined elements of authoritarianism with fascism, and that a better label for it is "fascistoid." He wrote:

"Like authoritarian systems, fascist systems lack meaningful parliaments, judiciaries, parties, and elections; are highly centralized; give pride of place to soldiers and policemen; have a domineering party; restrict freedom of the press, speech, and assembly; and repress the opposition."



Turkey was already headed in this direction before the coup. What distinguishes fascist systems from run-of-the-mill authoritarianism, according to Motyl, is that they “always have supreme leaders enjoying cult-like status, exuding vigor, youthfulness, and manliness.” If you look at Turkey today, we have an apt description of the regime Erdoğan is constructing if we substitute “Turkish” for “Russian” in Motyl’s prose here:

“authoritarian institutions serve as a platform for a charismatic leader who is committed to Russian greatness, hyper-nationalism, and neo-imperial revival and who serves as the primary source of regime legitimacy and stability.”

But how sustainable is such a regime in Turkey? Motyl wrote that the Russian regime “could break down overnight or decay for years.” This same observation can be applied to Turkey. On one hand, the Turkish economy, which was already in dire straits before the coup, is now on the brink of crisis. Turkey has an ongoing conflict with Kurdish movements in its southeast and is challenged by the situation in Syria (including ISIS). Yet Putin has survived similar or worse for many years—despite analysts such as Motyl pointing out how brittle his regime is. Turkey’s ties with the West, especially the United States, have never been so precarious as they are now. As is the case with Putin’s tactics, this works to Erdoğan’s advantage.

### Implications for Turkey-Russia Relations

Turkey and Russia have always had much in common: from their origins (both the Ottoman and the Russian state drew from Byzantine and Mongolian historical legacies) up to their radical modernizing regimes of the twentieth century. It seems that in Erdoğanism and Putinism, the fates of these countries mirror each other once again. Does this also mean that their foreign policy paths will converge as well? Erdoğan had apologized to Putin for the downing of the Russian jet two weeks before the coup, and on August 9 he visited Putin in Russia (his first official visit since July 15). It is understandable why Erdoğan is keen on a rapprochement with Russia—for [economic](#) and political\* reasons. However, given Turkey’s long-standing institutional ties with the West and its significant policy differences with Russia over Syria, most Western observers remain [skeptical](#) that this will amount to much. It is also true that notwithstanding their long history as regional neighbors and their many similarities, their bilateral legacy ultimately consists more of competition than of cooperation.

It is worth noting a moment of significant cooperation between the two countries: during and briefly after the aforementioned Turkish “Independence War” of 1919-1922, Kemal was in a genuine anti-imperialist alliance with Moscow, which provided his

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\* Since the coup attempt, relations between Turkey and the United States have been very tense. Improved relations with Russia are seen as a powerful leverage in that relationship. See for instance [this editorial](#) in the staunchly pro-government newspaper *Daily Sabah*.

fledgling militia with much needed financial support.\* During the Cold War years, this fact was downplayed in Turkish history textbooks, but these days, it could be creatively incorporated into the leadership's "New Independence War" narrative.

## Conclusion

Observers who discount the possibility of a Russo-Turkish alliance underestimate the political acumen of Putin and Erdoğan—and overestimate their inflexibility when it comes to Syria. Syria is not more important to Erdoğan than staying in power, and for Putin it may be more valuable, under the right circumstances, to follow a strategy that drives a deep wedge between Turkey and NATO. This is not to say that a Turkish realignment away from NATO is definitely in the cards, but given all that has (unexpectedly) [unfolded](#) over the past few months, to discount it completely would be foolish.

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\* For more about this alliance, see Ayşe Zarakol, [After Defeat: How the East Came to Live with the West](#), Cambridge University Press, 2011.



## **IV. Russia's Soft Power Projection**



# Eurasia, Eurasianism, Eurasian Union

## TERMINOLOGICAL GAPS AND OVERLAPS

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 366

July 2015

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Ever since Vladimir Putin launched the Eurasian Union project in 2011, scholars and the media have tended to analyze it as the victory of the Eurasianist ideology. This memo investigates the relationship between Eurasia, Eurasianism, and the Eurasian Union project. In looking at this specific relationship, I hope to capture the fact that ideas, ideologies, and doctrines, on the one hand, and ongoing political, institutional, and economic evolutions, on the other, may not be directly and causally connected.

The term “Eurasia” largely attained greater visibility for want of something better: it expresses conveniently, and in a rather intuitive way, the historical space of Russia and its “peripheries.” The term is not free of presuppositions, as it assumes a minimal geographical, if not geopolitical, unity between post-Soviet countries, or at least part of them. It also contains a fundamental terminological ambiguity: is it Europe *and* Asia, or *neither* Europe *nor* Asia? “Eurasia” was originally a geographical term coined to designate countries located on the Euro-Asian tectonic plate, thus covering both Europe and Asia. Even in its restricted meaning of being neither Europe nor Asia, but a median space of Russia and its neighbors, the term provokes debate on who does or does not belong to it.

Despite its limitations, the term has replaced “post-Soviet” in many North American, European, and Asian academic institutions and international organizations, as a way to describe the post-Soviet space without referring to the Soviet legacy. Paradoxically, it is used to describe Russia *and* the new states as well as the new states *without* Russia. In this way, it is given the adjective of *Central* Eurasia to encompass all the “others” of Russia: both external others—Central Asia, South Caucasus, Mongolia—and internal ones—North Caucasian, Tatar, Bashkir, and Siberian cultures.

### **Eurasia and Eurasianism are Plural Notions**

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The Russian language does not distinguish between Eurasian (a purely geographical definition) and Eurasianist (an ideological belief in the unity of this region): both are expressed as *evraziiskii*. Similarly, a Eurasian, in the sense of a person who lives in Eurasia or was born of a mixed Euro-Asian marriage, and an ideologue of Eurasianism will both be called *Evraziitsev*. Even since its founding at the start of the 1920s, Eurasianist ideology has been defined as *evraziistvo* (-*stvo* being the suffix of abstraction, while -*izm* is that of doctrine), which thus potentially leaves a semantic space open for *evrazizm* to emerge with another meaning, but no such neologism has yet been forged.

There are myriad Eurasianisms—from the classic version seen in the founding fathers of the 1920s-1930s, to Lev Gumilev's version during Soviet times, to neo-Eurasianisms, such as that promoted by the infamous geopolitician Alexander Dugin, who is also a vocal supporter of an updated fascist doctrine. The collapse of the Soviet Union multiplied narratives on the theme of Eurasia. They are to be found in present-day Russia but also in some of the other post-Soviet states, in particular Kazakhstan, where it functions as an official doctrine for a state that presents itself as an encounter between East and West, Europe and Asia, Russia and the East. Many neo-Eurasianisms are also present in the Russian Federation: in autonomous republics, some political figures and scholarly groups elaborate their own local versions of neo-Eurasianism, wielding it as a tool that allows for claims of localism and of loyalty to the Russian state. Tatarstan has been at the forefront of this trend, followed by Yakutia-Sakha. Multiple local variations have taken shape in Bashkortostan, Buryatia, Tuva, Kalmykia, and elsewhere.

Neo-Eurasianisms are also temporally diverse, insofar as their narratives have evolved over the past two decades. At the start of the 1990s they were used primarily to compensate for the Soviet collapse, offering a way of thinking about the suddenly fragmented post-Soviet space as a unity without referencing Communism. In the 2000s, the Kremlin's rehabilitation of the Soviet past as the key common dominator of Russian society, together with nostalgia for the late Soviet decades, weakened the originality of neo-Eurasianisms. They made their return, however, with the emergence of the Eurasian Union project—an old scheme promoted by Kazakhstan's president Nursultan Nazarbayev in 1994, but updated by Putin in 2011 to fit current tastes.

This new Eurasian Union is diverse too. The Eurasian Union strictly speaking is an aspirational project with a clear political endpoint—the recreation of some supra-national institutions—that is backed mostly by Putin and the Kremlin, with little enthusiasm from other countries. The Eurasian Economic Union is a different project, which include several member states: Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and probably Armenia. Seen from Moscow, Minsk, Astana, Bishkek, or Yerevan, it is each time imbued with a different color. The Kazakh case is the most divergent, as it has its own ideological genealogy, separated from the Russian one, and based on Nazarbayev's personal legitimacy. Last but not least, the member states are not the only ones that give an interpretation of what the Eurasian Economic Union is: the Eurasian Commission, the first genuinely supranational

post-Soviet body, has its own institutional practice and dynamism that often contradict the objectives of member states.

### **Eurasia without Eurasianism?**

In Russia, the term “Eurasia” has easily made a mark thanks to a certain terminological vacuum, enabling it to be adapted to shifting contexts and different realities. Under the label “Eurasia,” it is possible to express a geopolitical principle—that is, Russia’s claim to be the “pivotal” state and “engine” of the post-Soviet world, and its right to oversee the strategic orientations of its neighbors. But the term can also be used to designate a philosophical principle—that is, Russia’s status as the “other Europe,” an already old notion expressed by the Slavophiles in the first half of the nineteenth century. In this case, “Eurasia” is above all a *mirror* of Europe and the West, a *response* to what is perceived as a challenge that would undermine Russianness, and an *alternative* to what is seen as the deadlock of liberalism as ideology and the West as a civilization. Lastly, the term “Eurasia” points to a third dimension, that of memory, mourning, and commemoration. Through it, Russian society can understand the imperial and Soviet experiences: it enables it to make peace with the lost past, closing these historical chapters, at the same time integrating them into a national grand narrative.

It is probably the way that the term can inhabit the juncture of these different dimensions that explains its success and its instrumentalization by Russian authorities. Indeed, when Vladimir Putin launched his Eurasian Union project, his speech articulated several dimensions. He proclaimed that reintegrating the post-Soviet space under its leadership is Russia’s “natural” geopolitical destiny and that the country cannot be denied this vocation. He stated that the European Union has been a successful model to follow, and that Russia should offer an “EU-like” construction for Eurasia but also increasingly engage in a discourse criticizing liberal principles and call on Europe to remember its “true” (read: conservative) values. Last but not least, he accelerated the previous trend of rehabilitating Russia’s Soviet and, to a lesser extent, imperial past, in the hope that citizens’ pride in their country and its legacy would be replicated as support for the regime.

But what is the role of Eurasianism in this Eurasia? Even if the founding fathers of Eurasianism such as Nikolai Trubetskoi or Petr Savitskii were all republished with large print runs at the beginning of the 1990s, as were all the great authors of the Russian Silver Age, and reintegrated into the national pantheon, they enjoy only academic success. In Kremlin circles, the preference is to refer to conservative thinkers with a clear political message such as Konstantin Leonte and Ivan Ilyin rather than to the Eurasianists, who are not on Putin’s communication gurus’ list of “must-read” authors. In the autonomous republics and in Kazakhstan, the scholarly circles that celebrate Gumilev are much more interested in his concepts of “ethnos” and “passionarity” than that of Eurasia, and they do not return to the founding fathers. Dugin borrows his entire repertoire from the German Conservative Revolution and from the French and Italian New Right far more than from



the Eurasianist circles of the emigration. As for the high senior officials in charge of the Customs Union and Eurasian Union institutions, they derive inspiration from founding European texts such as that of Jean Monnet, or from Beijing's rhetoric of Chinese-style harmonious development, but not from Eurasianism.

### **Shared Assumptions, Disparate Projects**

Eurasianism and the Eurasian Union project share a similar vision of the fluidity of the term Eurasia. They both conflate Eurasia as the space that Russia has historically dominated and as the shared Euro-Asian continent, and tend to merge the definitions whenever they need to demonstrate the critical role of the strictly defined Eurasia within the broader one. They also overlap the territory of Eurasia with that of the Soviet Union, with some subtractions and additions. All consider the Baltic states to be part of Europe but not Eurasia. The Eurasianists tend to add Mongolia to their definition but subtract the South Caucasus, while the Eurasian Union project aims to hold onto the South Caucasus but does not have much interest in Mongolia.

In both cases, there exists a core group of Eurasian countries, Russia and parts of Ukraine and Kazakhstan, that represent the historical interaction between the Slavic and steppe worlds. In both cases, Ukraine is seen as a divided country, fractured by a "civilizational" line of divide between Europe and Eurasia, where eastern Ukraine is integrated into Eurasia and western Ukraine is seen to be moving toward its European destiny. To this core group can be added some concentric circles of other countries that are welcome to join, but with secondary roles: the sedentary and more Islamic Central Asia and Christian Armenia and Georgia. A third concentric circle includes countries that are outside the strictly defined Eurasia but are potential "bedfellows": Eurasianists have traditionally mentioned Iran and Japan, while the Eurasian Union prefers Vietnam, Syria, and Egypt as potential free trade partners.

However, the overlap between Russian Eurasianism and the Eurasian Union stops there. As we delve into the contents of the Eurasian project, in terms of political values and economic politics, critical dissonances soon emerge. The Eurasian Union takes nothing from (neo-)Eurasianism in defining a political and economic strategy for the region. No official text produced in Russia about the Eurasian Union mentions Eurasianism as an ideology. Dugin has not been given any official status since the coming into force of the Eurasian Economic Union; he is not a member of the Public Chamber and he even lost his position at Moscow State University since the onset of the Ukraine conflict.

### **Conclusion**

Eurasianism predates the Eurasian Union. It has its own intellectual genealogy and its doctrinaires have not been co-opted by the Kremlin. Eurasianism connects mostly to the sphere of metapolitics and operates independently of the regime's political project, the

rationale of which is far more pragmatic and based on other kinds of references. Hence the strange destiny of a movement, Eurasianism, that has contributed to shaping Russian intellectual life in the twentieth century but which is today both central and forgotten. The more “Eurasia” invades Russia’s public space, popular culture, and state-produced narratives in Russia, the more forgetful of its Eurasianist founding ideologists it seems to be. The production of ideas, their agents, and places of production should thus be given more attention. We need to examine the deployment of terms and their operationalization before taking a restraining shortcut of conflating metapolitics with state strategies.



# Reassembling Lands or Reconnecting People?

## GEOPOLITICS AND BIOPOWER IN RUSSIA'S NEIGHBORHOOD POLICY

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 367

July 2015

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Post-Soviet states tend to view Russian policies toward them through a geopolitical lens, interpreting the approaches as that of a regional power competing for the control of nearby lands. This, however, is only half the picture. Russia's approach to its so-called "near abroad" includes an important refinement: between the geopolitical control of territory and the biopolitical administration of populations. We can better understand this difference by juxtaposing Eurasianism, as a set of geopolitical ideas focused on governing territories, and the "Russian world," as a biopolitical doctrine premised on protecting an imagined transborder community with a common identity.

Contesting realist explanations, I assert that both Eurasianism and the "Russian world" as neighborhood strategies have unfolded beyond the domain of the state, and their proponents prefer to keep a certain distance from the Kremlin. In this memo I explore the policy implications of the geopolitical and biopolitical approaches, the conceptual gaps between them, and the areas of mutual gravitation. I also discuss the implications of the geopolitics-biopolitics nexus for the current crisis in Russian-Ukrainian relations.

### **The Geopolitics – Biopolitics Nexus**

Geopolitics and biopolitics emerged as two key elements of a rather ambiguous Russian policy toward its post-Soviet neighbors. On the one hand, post-Soviet Russian elites tended to view all ideologies as discredited and unnecessary, fueling aversion to the development of ideological constructs. On the other hand, Russian diplomacy understood the need to ground power over neighboring states in something "natural," "objective," and "indisputable." "Civilizational" geopolitics (which treats Russia as a country with a natural sphere of influence) and biopolitics (which emphasizes Russia's family-like connection to its "compatriots living abroad") became cornerstones of an allegedly non-ideological but pervasive neighborhood strategy aimed at the reintegration of post-Soviet lands.

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With all their differences, both concepts were premised on the incompleteness of the Russian Federation and its incongruence with the idea of a “genuine Russia,” which supposedly should be extended beyond its current borders. The two concepts may overlap, as epitomized by the annexation of Crimea and Russia’s insistence on spheres of influence under the guise of “Russian world” slogans. Yet they also differ significantly from each other, as I demonstrate below.

### **Geopolitics and Eurasianism**

Most variants of Russia’s geopolitical/Eurasianist neighborhood policy share at least four important tenets. First, they are explicitly anti-neoliberal, which makes them especially popular among both conservatives and the left. Second, their common denominator is the perceived fluidity of Russian borders: Eurasianist ideologies portray Russia’s borders as movable frontiers rather than as relatively stable instruments for delineating the outside of the country from within. Third, geopolitical thinkers claim that Russia’s identification with Europe comes with a high price of submission. Finally, many argue that the only alternative to a Russian sphere of influence throughout the post-Soviet space is military confrontation.

Despite these commonalities, at least two main versions of Eurasianism can be discerned. One is *normative and ideological* and associated with Alexander Dugin’s anti-universalist doctrine aimed at deconstructing Western hegemony. It contains post-colonial elements (i.e., Russia as forced to submit to the imperial policies of Euro-Atlantic forces) and is close to the leftist critique of the West as a civilization allegedly grounded in racist attitudes toward outsiders. Dugin’s geopolitics, however, are not state-centric; his major reference points are civilizations, not nation-states.

A different vision of Eurasianism is grounded in *geo-economic* reasoning. This vision portrays the EU as a colonial power, a politicizing actor that functions beyond economic rationality, while portraying Russia as a state that sets politics and ideology aside for the sake of pragmatism. Russian presidential advisor Sergey Glazyev has even claimed that the main difference between the EU and the Eurasian Union is that the former deprives neighboring countries of their sovereignty while the latter protects it. For Glazyev, Eurasianism is Russia’s attempt to challenge the predominance of Euro-Atlantic institutions by forming its own wide bloc of countries, as well as to geopolitically counter-attack by means of enticing Greece, Cyprus, and Hungary to break out of the EU orbit.

### **Biopolitics and the Genealogy of the Russian World**

Biopolitical discourse—even if it comes under other, less academic, names—offers its own language of post-Soviet integration. It provides an overarching platform aimed at reattaching Russian-speaking communities to Russia while re-constituting Russian identity. The key biopolitical metaphor is the family, with its strong Soviet and imperial

connotations. Its adherents view the disintegration of the Soviet Union as less a “geopolitical catastrophe,” as Vladimir Putin famously dubbed it, than a “biopolitical catastrophe” which turned Russians into a divided nation.

Biopolitics as a concept is much broader than either ethnopolitics or “kinship politics.” As I show below, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which has some influence in the realm of biopower, denies that ethnicity is the crucial factor defining the concept of the Russian world. Viacheslav Nikonov, the head of the “Russkiy Mir” foundation established in 2007, claimed a few years later that the whole project is inherently trans-ethnic, since Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Jews can be part of the “Russian world.” He underlined the biopolitical core of the concept by arguing that “we need to aggregate people, not lands.” Underlining the “objective” and allegedly neutral character of the Russian world, he asserted that “it is about justice and truth, not nationality.”

Biopolitics contains strong non-governmental elements. Beyond the state—though in close proximity to it—ideas about the Russian world have been promoted from two dissimilar perspectives: the technocratic (Pyotr Schedrovitsky, Sergey Chernyshov, Sergey Gradirovsky) and the religious (ROC).

The *technocratic* version, popular in the 1990s, was associated with ideas of cosmopolitanism and world-system theory. The concept resonated among the liberal part of the Russian political community, which conceived of the Russian world as part of a global trend toward post-national and territorially-dispersed governance. They saw the Russian world as a global mega-project reattaching the Russian diaspora to Russia and, hence, as part of a globalized world of trans-border mobility, communication, and networking.

Proponents of this idea did not believe in the smooth inclusion of Russia into world civilization, which they viewed as highly competitive and unfriendly. In their view, the strongest global actors would never accept Russia as an equal partner. This stimulated a binary type of thinking: “they would make us extensions of themselves.” Many policy thinkers believed that Russians were deprived of their “authentic” identity during Soviet times and after. As they perceived the West becoming more sophisticated in its policies, they saw Russians “miserable without a (Russian) World.”

Even in this technocratic narrative, the concept became tantamount to empire. In the 1990s, proponents [advocated](#) less for the construction of a modern nation-state within Russia’s contemporary borders than a “return” to something authentic and “real,” a “Russian alternative” (evidently, to the West).

The technocratic reading of the Russian world did not imply territorial expansion, however. Rather, it was akin to the notion of “cultural imperialism.” Future conflicts would not be over territory but communication among large agglomerations of people,

with the key to success being investment in human capital. This gave the Russian world a humanitarian spin, an element of soft power aimed at producing an attractive “image of the future.”

The *religious* vision of the Russian world emanated from the ROC, which claimed that the boundaries of the Russian world coincide with the canonical boundaries of the Church. Geographically, this concept embraces Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus; sometimes Moldova and Kazakhstan are also mentioned. The religious conceptualization assumes that in civilizational terms the “real” Russia is more than the current Russian Federation.

Unlike secular versions of the Russian world, the religious discourse insists that it is not language but Orthodoxy that determines the boundaries. The ROC is also critical of the characterization of the Russian world as a trans-ethnic community, insisting that Russians are a “super-ethnos” that incorporates many other smaller ethnic groups both inside and outside Russia. Finally, the ROC does not agree with the poly-confessional nature of the Russian world, claiming Orthodoxy at its core. This explains why the Russian Muslim community tends to be critical of the “Russian world.” Damir Mukhetdinov, deputy chairman of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia, has [dubbed](#) it a proto-ideology that is constitutionally questionable and disrespectful to Russia’s Muslim population.

As a key element of its neighborhood policy, Russia includes in the sphere of “biopolitical care” categories of people like pensioners and Second World War veterans who live outside the country; migrants from Armenia who receive the same labor rights as Russian citizens; and students from eastern Ukraine who compete on an equal footing with Russian students for university admission. At the same time, the policies of “biopolitical care” are conducive to the Russian incorporation of certain territories, as evidenced by the annexation of Crimea and the close integration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In all its versions, biopolitics is a strategy ultimately aimed at redefining extant borders. It thus plays a political role, even if this is refuted by promoters. Biopolitical borders shape the dynamics of inclusion in—and exclusion from—Russia as a political community with shifting territorial contours.

At the same time, the biopolitical strategy also contains strong exclusionary elements. It reduces the importance of wide swathes of Central Asia and the South Caucasus where the ethnically Russian population is statistically miniscule and cannot constitute a viable political resource. Russia’s support for the military insurgency in Ukraine on behalf of the “Russian world” also demonstrated how the concept could negatively impact the implementation of the Eurasian project, as it tempered the enthusiasm of the Belarusian and Kazakh leaders for the Eurasian Union.

## The Crisis in Russia-Ukraine Relations: Geopolitics and Biopower

Territorial politics can go biopolitical, while biopolitics can evolve into land grabs. This is what the war in Ukraine has illustrated: the biopolitics of the Russian world merging with the geopolitical seizure of territory (and war).

The intertwining of humanitarian care and territorial appropriation reveals the coercive dimension of biopolitics due to the Kremlin interpretation of the Russian world as a matter of “political choice” between staying in or out, with a severe reaction reserved for those who opt for the latter. The projection of an either-or logic of political distinction onto Ukraine triggered war and inevitably refocused attention from caring for people to legitimizing mass killing within territories that the adherents of the Russian world considered to be rightfully theirs. This coercive dimension of biopolitics was clearly [articulated](#) by Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin’s claim that “civil war gives birth to people with a [more] civil position.”

The crisis in Ukraine triggered the overt politicization of biopolitical and geopolitical discourses. In the biopolitical realm, this was illustrated by the devolution of the “Russkiy Mir” foundation from a model based on similar European institutions (like the Alliance Francaise, the British Council, the Goethe Institute, and the Cervantes Institute) to a militant advocate for a specific set of state policies. Nikonov rejected his previous assurance that “Ukraine was formed as an independent nation” in favor of promoting the recognition of the “independence” of eastern Ukrainian provinces. His [interpretation](#) of the Euromaidan revolution as a declaration of war on Russia and the government in Kyiv as “assassins of its own people” clearly demonstrates the possibilities for politicizing and radicalizing the concept of the Russian world.

The same goes for geopolitics. The crisis in Ukraine pushed many Eurasianist proponents into the radical nationalist opposition. For example, Mikhail Delyagin has [spoken](#) about the “obvious failure of Russian policy toward Ukraine,” manifested in his view by the Kremlin’s de facto support of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko’s “Nazi regime.” Dugin praised Putin for the annexation of Crimea but lambasted him for hesitating to intervene militarily in eastern Ukraine. He claims that Putin faces the challenge of transforming Russia from an (economically motivated) “state-corporation” to a full-fledged “state-civilization” capable of putting an end to Western hegemony and openly acknowledges that to achieve this transition Russia must be ready for real war.

Meanwhile, the religious discourse, which is typically supportive of state policy, has moved in a different direction. Its adherents view the crisis in Ukraine as “incomprehensible,” necessitating “only prayer.” The symbolic absence of the Patriarch at the ceremony incorporating Crimea into Russia may be interpreted as a sign of his disappointment with the way Putin has used the idea of the Russian world. The ROC made clear that it does not take sides and that it has representatives on both sides of the



conflict. In his message to president-elect Poroshenko, Patriarch Kirill [characterized](#) Ukraine as an “inheritor and protector of the testaments of the great prince Vladimir who baptized Russia....During my visits to Ukraine I have seen everywhere the best of Christian traditions.” In this view, Ukraine is not a country whose deviation from the Russian world represents a challenge to Moscow but rather the most authentic incarnation of Orthodoxy. At the same time, while speaking about the conflict in Ukraine, the Patriarch emphasized the necessity of preserving the unity of Russia itself – a sign of disapproval of Russia’s territorial expansion.

Still, the ROC has failed to stay out of politics. It sees the origins of the conflict in the political activity of Western Ukrainian Greek Catholics. In the ROC’s interpretation, Western Ukrainians were instrumental in instigating inter-ethnic clashes, which reached their zenith during the Euromaidan. Emulating the Kremlin’s discourse, the ROC portrays Ukrainian Greek Catholics as former collaborators of Nazi Germany. It also links the Euromaidan with developments in the Middle East, a chain of events allegedly aimed at fostering instability along Russia’s borders.

## **Conclusion**

Russia’s neighborhood policies are a blend of Eurasianism and Russian world doctrines. This widens Russia’s policy toolkit by means of combining geopolitical strategies with the biopolitical care of populations beyond Russia’s borders. The problem, clearly elucidated by the war in Ukraine, is that both doctrines are prone to radicalization and militarization. Geopolitical reasoning easily evolves from calculating Russian resources and advantages in the “near abroad” to militarily conquering parts of neighboring states, while biopolitics shifts from protecting the linguistic rights of Russian speakers to enforcing a family-type of union with post-Soviet nations. As the annexation of Crimea made clear, it is the combination of geopolitical and biopolitical instruments that Russia has used to redefine its borders, triggering security dangers for the entire Euro-Atlantic region.

# Russia “Understanders” in Europe

## DISCOURSES, COMMUNICATION, CONSEQUENCES

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 435

August 2016

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The Ukraine conflict reinforced the desire of Kremlin policymakers to establish connections with a range of anti-status-quo groups in Europe. Moscow’s broad aim is to catalyze support for and legitimize Russian sovereignty (and hegemony) and, perhaps, even the dissolution of the European Union project. The Kremlin has made ties with a variety of Russia sympathizers (“understanders”) in Europe a priority, and these groups and Moscow have found pragmatic use for each other’s platforms. Russian policymakers, however, seem to be aware that over-association with controversial European groups contains risks, particularly if Russian public perception views such connections as disagreeable.

### **The Structure of Putin’s Support**

There are four groups of “Russia understanders” in Europe:

The first group is a pragmatic one, with members mostly prevalent in Germany, France, Italy, Finland, and the Baltic states. Members of this group are connected to the economic and political interests of businesses looking for new opportunities in Russian markets. “Russia understanders” in Germany are especially keen to reproduce the ideological mantras of modernization theory, based on a particular interpretation of the end of the Cold War that considers the latter a result of Germany’s economic engagement with the Soviet Union.

In the second group are those that have political identities largely based on ethnic and/or civilizational affinity with Russia. These are most prevalent in places like Latvia and Estonia, but also in pockets across Europe such as Bulgaria and Greece.

The third group includes some leftist, neo-Marxist, and communist parties in Western Europe, such as the Left Party in Germany and Italian and French Communists. These see the struggle between Russia and the West as one of two competing hegemonies. They tend

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to favor insurgents in eastern Ukraine in their alleged struggle against “fascism.”

The fourth group comprises far right parties such as the National Front in France, Vlaams Belang in Belgium, Jobbik in Hungary, Ataka in Bulgaria, the National Democratic Party in Germany, the Northern League and Forza Nuova in Italy, the Freedom Party in Austria, Golden Dawn in Greece, and the British National Party. Their common denominator seems to be a strong appeal to the nation-state; they stand against supranational authorities they lambast for their alleged pro-U.S. stance and immigration-friendly policies. This last group is perhaps of greatest interest given the rise of social conservatism and nationalist agendas in both Russia and Europe today.

### **Russia’s Discourses: Convenient Common Causes\***

Though it may sometimes seem the opposite, the Russian political mainstream is not strictly anti-European. In spite of many advocates for a Russian U-turn from Europe to Asia, Moscow does not seek to disrupt Russian connections with the EU but instead to open up the idea of Europe (“from Lisbon to Vladivostok”) to include contemporary Russia. As Russian political scholar Vasily Zharkov [argued](#) in early 2016 at the peak of Russia’s confrontation with Europe:

“The Russian capital looks nothing like a besieged fortress....There is nothing to suggest a desire of Russians to turn away from Europe. On the contrary, Moscow has perhaps never looked as European as today....The existing conflict with the West can be explained as a natural continuation of the unceasing Europeanization of Russia. Moreover, it will result not in a turn away from the West but, most likely, an even closer coming together.

A few months earlier, Russian political analyst Gleb Pavlovsky [wrote](#) of “Russia’s unbreakable bond with Europe”:

“A...sizzling and demonically passionate bond. No European nation... could share or comprehend this passion. Russia does not just impose itself on the West. It is convinced that the West can and should be resolving its problems, live with them, and live with Russia too....The new Russia did not want to defeat the West but to join it. In our dreams we had “already” joined, thanks to the dollarization of everyday life, politics, and economics....The long list of clear “evidence” made the West’s refusal to regard us as equals appear incomprehensible and malicious.”

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\* This section is partly based on a recently published article: Stefano Braghiroli and Andrey Makarychev, “[Russia and its supporters in Europe: a trans-ideology a-la-carte?](#)” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Volume 16, Issue 2, March 2016.

At the same time, narratives of Russian national identity have long held to the notion of “two” Europes. Norwegian political scientist Iver Neumann has [discussed](#) the century-long Russian distinction between “true” and “false” Europe. This dichotomy also existed during the Cold War era, when Eastern Europe was posited as an alternative, Russia-friendly Europe. A more recent example is the headline “Yet, There Is a Different Europe,” which appeared in 2014 in the Russian far-right newspaper *Zavtra* for an article about the Italian Northern League party.

Nowadays Putin propagandists seek to inscribe Russia within a wider European trend of EU-skepticism and anti-migration sentiments. The ideologies of European far-right parties accommodate three major elements of the Kremlin’s ideal vision:

First, Kremlin policymakers believe there is no place for supranational institutions such as the EU, which Moscow lambasts for its bureaucratic inertia and financial inefficiency. As *Voice of Russia* political analyst Dmitry Babich [wrote](#):

“In a way it’s reminiscent of the Middle Ages, when Orthodox Russia’s relations with individual European states could be better or worse, depending on realpolitik, but its relations with the Vatican were invariably frozen and full of ideological distrust. Today, the EU obviously aims to be the new Holy Roman Empire, taking on the role of moral arbiter and central authority. This is something that both Russia and Great Britain have always found hard to accept...”

Second, in the Kremlin’s reasoning, Europe should be cleansed of its liberal emancipatory agenda, which is incompatible with growing conservatism inside Russia and causes harm to EU-Russia relations. The Kremlin concluded early on that the more the EU emphasizes liberal values, the lesser the chance for Russia to be accepted as an equal partner. This explains Moscow’s insistence on depoliticizing foreign policy (understood in the narrow sense of ridding it of liberal connotations).

Third, the Kremlin feels that Europe needs to distance itself from the United States as an “extra-regional force.” Since Russia was unable to integrate with Euro-Atlantic structures, Western institutions, particularly NATO, are viewed in Moscow with suspicion, if not disgust.

On all three counts, European far right parties may be counted as supporters of the Putin regime’s Eurosceptic, anti-liberal, and U.S.-critical attitude. They share the view that there is a “Europe of banks” and a “Europe of peoples,” that the EU’s overly supranational nature decreases its democratic legitimacy, that there needs to be a revival of the nation-state, and that Europe is under excessive U.S. influence. They also tend to share the Kremlin’s sympathy for homophobic sentiment and its support of traditional family values.

Through all of this, Kremlin ideology also has a practical side. Russia is eager to destabilize the EU from within, weaken the Euro-Atlantic nexus, and undermine U.S. hegemony under the aegis of multipolarity and equality. This can give Russia a chance to “re-nationalize” Europe and re-define it in anti-liberal terms. On this basis, it seeks to re-position Russia as a full-fledged European power and forge a “concert of great powers” mostly representing “good old Europe.”

### **Russia’s Communication Strategies**

Russia has messages to convey to its supporters in Europe, but these messages still need to be properly communicated. There are two interesting aspects about the communications between Putin’s regime and far-right parties in Europe.

First, there has only been a gradual – and largely indirect – accommodation of Russian elites to liaisons with European far-right parties. Initial connections did not even involve the Kremlin. For example, Sergey Baburin, head of the “All-Russian Union” party, has claimed that in 2006 he invited former National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen to Russia. This triggered tensions even among Russian nationalist figures. According to Baburin, he was expelled from the Rodina faction in parliament by its leader Dmitry Rogozin for initiating Le Pen’s visit. A few years later, Rogozin, as deputy prime minister, met Le Pen in Moscow.

Neither Putin nor Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev have publicly revealed any of their own direct linkages to like-minded Europeans. Formal communication develops through people like Rogozin or others in parliament. Informal contacts are sustained by people like Alexander Dugin or Sergey Markov who are outside the government’s inner circle. When Bulgarian Ataka party leader Volen Siderov travelled to Moscow in 2012 to celebrate Putin’s birthday, reportedly at his own expense, the Kremlin wished to keep this liaison only at a “personal” level. Initial contacts with Greece’s left-wing Syriza party were established by the pro-government Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI).

Second, the Russian mainstream media, when reporting about far-right parties’ support for Putin (including their role as “international observers” of the referendum in Crimea), prefer to present them as “European politicians” without mentioning their party affiliation. This suggests the Kremlin is interested in demonstrating an acceptance of Russia’s policies within Europe rather than displaying ideological affinities with partners having potentially questionable reputations.

Moscow thus acts rather cautiously in its pursuit of two major goals—cultivating a stronghold in Europe and legitimizing connections with new European partners through relatively low-profile events (such as public lectures or at the Valdai Club forum). To a large extent, Putin uses a resource similar to that practiced by the West: soft power.

Examples include charities, such as the Great Saint Basil Foundation, sponsored by the conservative Russian tycoon Konstantin Malofeev, and non-commercial organizations, such as the Center of the National Glory of Russia, whose chairman is former Russian Railways chief Vladimir Yakunin.

The Kremlin also utilizes some Western entities—for example, the U.S.-based World Congress of Families, which has made [statements](#) such as: “At a time when Western governments are moving backward to a pagan worldview, Russia has taken a leadership role to advance the natural family.” Experience sharing is important: referring to the anti-abortion bill passed in 2011, Lyubov Erofeeva, executive director of the Russian Association for Population and Development, [said](#): “everything was copied from the experience of American fundamentalists and conservative circles of several European countries where abortion is forbidden or restricted severely.”

One major problem with Russia’s communication strategy is that too close an association with far-right parties can be interpreted as political support for a number of issues that are controversial for Russia. This includes Islamophobic and anti-Semitic attitudes within the European right, which the Kremlin officially rejects. As per a May 2014 [article](#) in *Time*:

“That is the crux of the Kremlin’s European dilemma. Its economic interests dictate the need to spread discord inside the EU, but its natural allies in this effort are exactly the kinds of political forces that the Russian people have long been taught to detest. Right wing parties like Jobbik in Hungary and the National Front in France are the offspring of the political tradition that Russia defeated in World War II, and the cult of that victory still lies at the core of Russia’s sense of self. No less importantly, nationalism in Russia is broadly seen as a dangerous centrifugal force, one that could tear the country apart if it spreads to Moscow’s ethnically distinct dominions.”

Overplaying far-right ideology could also be dangerous due to the fact that it is Ukraine’s far-right that is most determined to militarily resist Russia’s Ukraine policies (as evidenced by the role and character of Ukraine’s Azov division).

## Conclusion

Russia is a trans-ideological actor that pragmatically transcends, if not disregards, ideological divides. In Putin’s trans-ideological project, all identities are instrumental tools for legitimizing Russia’s hegemony and grounded in claims that Russia is protecting its sovereignty and fighting neo-fascism. Yet, domestically, the Kremlin’s trans-ideological mix might be uncomfortable for some ideologically explicit groups in Russia that support Putin’s policies but dislike, for example, the leftist background of parties like Syriza that share an emancipatory and LGBT-friendly agenda.

The crisis in Ukraine became an important playground for testing Russia’s strategy in Europe. Russia’s European “understanders” legitimize Moscow’s Eurasian ambitions and the right to defend its interests and those of its “compatriots” by force and annexation. Some commentators [predict](#) that “a Fifth International, a loose collection of anti-status quo forces, is emerging out of the chaos of the Ukraine conflict.” This alliance might be based on solidarity in combatting allegedly pro-Nazi forces in Ukraine or supporting a return from supra-national regulation to a world of sovereign nation states. But such alliances not only threaten to negate Ukraine’s European identity. More alarmingly, they can justify a retrograde reinstatement of a “concert of great powers” which in practice can mean a new cycle of spheres of influence in Europe – an option that many in the West would find most unfortunate.

## **V. An Uneasy Partnership with China**





# Mistrust Sets Low Ceiling for Russia-China Partnership

## DECONSTRUCTING THE PUTIN-XI JINPING RELATIONSHIP

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 447

November 2016

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No amount of propaganda can hide the fact that the Russian-Chinese partnership is not progressing well. Economic cooperation was supposed to constitute a solid foundation for a new surge in bilateral ties, as heralded in mid-2014 against the background of the Ukraine conflict and heightened Russia-West confrontation. In reality, trade volume between the two countries contracted by about a third in 2015, which they explained away with adverse external factors such as the decline of oil prices. The Russian president has pointed to the strength of their political ties as moving their relationship from merely “strategic partnership” [to](#) “comprehensive partnership and strategic collaboration.” But it is precisely in the political sphere that the incompatibility between the two is most profound. It is shaped by sharply dissimilar motivations and aspirations among the elites rooted in a gulf between their respective political cultures—a disconnect accentuated by reshuffles initiated by two leaders facing vastly different domestic challenges. A misunderstanding of each other’s responses to these challenges generates a lack of trust, constituting a greater hindrance to upgrading the bilateral partnership than economic setbacks.

### **Boredom in the “Beautiful Friendship”**

The exaggerated friendliness of personal relations between President Vladimir Putin and President Xi Jinping is public relations gloss. These two 63-year old men have very little in common. One is a “[princeling](#)” who had a nice head start on the tenacious climb to the top of the Chinese party ladder; the other is a man of humble origin, propelled to a position of power by others precisely because he was an outsider. One is a happily married man; the other is a divorcé who cannot find the courage to legalize his personal relations with a girlfriend 30 years his junior and who is allegedly the mother of a daughter they had together. One [experienced](#) the senseless cruelty of the Cultural Revolution as a teenager; the other was shocked by a revolution that swept away the East German police state and cut short his undistinguished KGB career. The two leaders do not have a language in

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common. And their meetings have become less frequent: Putin missed the APEC summit in November 2015 and Xi skipped the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in June 2016.

The political careers of the two leaders are also remarkably out of sync, not a great foundation for strong personal chemistry. In 2011-12, Putin was orchestrating his return to the Kremlin amidst unexpected street protests in Moscow while Xi was engaged in a carefully planned process of taking over from President Hu Jintao (who enjoyed broad domestic and international support). Today, Putin is organizing what he hopes will be his uncontested presidential re-election in early 2018 (having now already orchestrated the September 2016 parliamentary elections), while Xi has to make the difficult choice of naming a successor, which has to be approved by the Communist Party Congress in November 2017. It is possible that Xi entertains ideas of altering the rigid pattern of Chinese leadership rotation that was introduced by Deng Xiaoping. Putin, however, illustrates the drawbacks of indefinite rule for an omnipotent leader, including a steep decline in efficiency and the accumulation of unhealthy paternalist rituals.

They do share a pronounced urge to gain political power and skill in wielding it. However, even if Xi has [earned](#) the ironic title of “Chairman of Everything” for his propensity to preside over every important commission, Putin has accumulated far greater power. There are no checks and balances in Russia, and there is no political faction that could conceivably rally around an alternative leader. There is a mature personality cult around Putin, while in China, Xi’s success at establishing himself as the “core leader” at the October 2016 Plenum remains ambiguous (Hu Jintao refrained from assuming that title). Xi has to work with the stout Politburo Standing Committee, which has many Hu Jintao appointees, including Premier Li Keqiang.

Both leaders are presently executing massive purges of bureaucratic cadres, but for Putin, these are primarily a means to assert control over the warring of various loyal clans. Xi is [involved](#) in a real struggle for power focused on undermining the “sixth generation” grouping—potential leaders groomed through the Communist Youth League. Xi and his team understand perfectly well the nature of policymaking in the Kremlin, but it is very doubtful that Putin has a good grasp of the complex and vicious intrigues in Beijing, particularly since nobody in Putin’s “inner circle” is a known China expert.

### **Presiding over Diverging Economic Trajectories**

Ten years ago, Russia and China each enjoyed the status of “emerging power.” Both exhibited strong economic growth. Presently, the two leaders have to deal with urgent but dissimilar economic problems at home. Putin has found himself in the unfamiliar and uncomfortable position of managing a protracted recession, which has reduced Russia’s economy to about one-eighth of China’s. Xi has dealt with a mere [slowdown](#), but the spasms of panic on China’s stock markets indicate an accumulation of uncertainties caused by stalled reforms. Placing absolute priority on stimulating growth, the Chinese leadership

finds it incomprehensible that the Russian leadership continually opts to sacrifice modernization and economic development for the sake of geopolitical ambition.

Xi has assumed greater than usual responsibility for managing the Chinese economy. He helped [set](#) the key guidelines for stimulating the expansion of extra-large state corporations (reducing Li Keqiang's authority). Putin's economic guidelines are actually quite compatible, but the performance of large Russian state-owned corporations is dismal. Chinese pro-market reformers, who insist on reducing the state's ownership of industrial assets, could actually point to the Russian measures as negative examples. Gazprom is well-known in the Chinese Ministry of Energy as a hugely inefficient monopolist. The \$2 billion loan granted to it this year by the Bank of China was necessary to keep it solvent—but this was so that it can keep working on the “strategic” gas deal between Russia and China signed in May 2014; the project's objectives are seriously [behind](#) schedule.

China's experience with Rosneft is more positive. Its CEO, Igor Sechin, is [known](#) as a proponent for expanding business with China. The completion of the ESPO pipeline has allowed Rosneft to become a major supplier in the Chinese market (on par with Saudi Arabia), but with Russian oil production on a [plateau](#) with a probable decline ahead, there is little capacity for expansion. An interesting new development this year has been China's direct participation in the Yamal-LNG project led by Novatek in the extreme north of western Siberia. This unusual engagement with a non-state company is not driven by the need for additional gas. Rather, according to some Russian experts, it was a good-will gesture made by Xi to rescue Novatek's owner, Gennady Timchenko, who is close to Putin and was personally [targeted](#) by Western sanctions.

The struggle against corruption occupies a major place in the economic agendas of both leaders, but these places are different, not fitting well together. Xi unleashed a campaign for “catching tigers and flies,” which was a sustained attack on his political opponents. He put behind bars about 200 senior officials (the “tigers”), [targeting](#) associates of Hu Jintao in particular. For Putin, high-profile corruption investigations are mostly a means of regulating infighting between rival clans, and they rarely result in jail sentences. Trust levels between the two leaders were not increased when Putin dispatched to Beijing confidential proposals carried by First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov and Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich earlier this year—both of these emissaries were implicated in corruption scandals at the time and their Chinese counterparts were perfectly aware of this, leading the latter to wonder why such figures would be sent their way.

### ***Siloviki are Poor Bridge-Builders***

The dissimilar campaigns against corruption mirror the differences in how Putin and Xi cultivate their respective security apparatuses. In principle, domestic security could be an area where the two non-democratic regimes could pursue compatible agendas. However,

the control over and political profiles of each state's security services are strikingly at variance.

The central role in Xi's struggle against corruption belongs to the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, which is an institution of the Communist Party of China (CPC), currently [led](#) by Xi's trusted ally Wang Qishan, who most probably will have to [leave](#) his post in 2017. In Russia, it is the Investigative Committee led by Alexander Bastrykin that spearheads high-profile corruption cases—that is, until it came under direct attack from the more powerful FSB under Alexander Bortnikov in the summer of 2016. Putin has played the role of arbiter in the turf wars between various law enforcement agencies, but as the stakes in controlling Russia's diminishing cash flows rise, Russia's feuding *siloviki* are hitting each other with various scandalous corruption revelations.\*

The composition of each leader's entourage is crucially important for the further development of their personal ties and for cultivating political networks that can add depth and sustainability to the bilateral relationship. A mismatch is apparent here as well, and it is growing sharper. Xi relies on his old associates and schoolmates, like Liu He, his key economic adviser. Xi is also investing much effort into [building](#) a “Zhejiang faction,” named after the province where he was party secretary from 2002 until 2007. Putin is now ditching old cronies like Vladimir Yakunin, Yevgeny Murov, and Andrei Belyaninov, and [promoting](#) a new generation of *siloviki* with the expectation that they will be blindly loyal and somewhat more efficient. He is even appointing some of his trusted bodyguards as regional governors, a practice which is incomprehensible to those in charge of cadres in China's leadership.

The Russian government's over-reliance on high- and mid-level FSB officers negatively impacts Putin's control over the Russian Armed Forces, where the officer corps still resents the reforms implemented by former Putin protégé Anatoly Serdyukov. Putin therefore has to delegate substantial authority to Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, who has the respect of Russia's top brass but cherishes his own political agenda and independent profile. In China, Xi has taken personal responsibility for advancing military reform, which is broadly supported by the Armed Forces, and has [promoted](#) close associates, such as Zhong Shaojun, to key positions in China's military hierarchy.

## Conclusion

Behind the veneer of a “perfect rapport” between Putin and Xi lies a deep lack of trust that grows out of a mismatch in personalities and strikingly dissimilar domestic agendas. Putin has exterminated all political alternatives and positioned himself as the only source of legitimacy for the Russian state. Xi must contend with strong opposing factions and the unavoidable issue of his own succession. Their circles of associates are not compatible—the

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\* See *Foreign Policy's* [parody letter](#) to the “Most Esteemed Vladimir Vladimirovich!”

Chinese provincial political cliques have little interest in relations with Russia, while Putin's FSB networks are far better at intrigues than they are at foreign relations. Corruption is a major problem in both states, but their anti-corruption campaigns differ: Xi uses anti-corruption initiatives as a strategic weapon against opponents while Putin dabbles in them as a selective punishment mechanism to promote loyalty.

All told, Putin has a poor grasp on the unique combination of China's sustained economic growth and renewable political stability and certainly cannot reproduce it. Xi Jinping knows the value of "patriotic" mobilization but cannot comprehend Putin's decision to sacrifice economic growth and modernization for the sake of geopolitical ambition. Chinese policy-makers have carefully studied the lessons from the collapse of the USSR and, after initially blaming Mikhail Gorbachev's mistakes, have concluded that the more fundamental problem was the escalation of a systemic crisis. Chinese analysts have good reasons to suspect that Putin has unleashed a similar crisis, one growing beyond his ability to control it. They also know that unlike Gorbachev, Putin cannot give up without a fight. This does not mean Putin would win the fight, only that the crisis would turn violent without becoming controllable. And this does not make Putin a predictable or trustworthy partner in China's eyes.



# Is Russia Coming to Terms with China's "Silk Road"?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 439

September 2016

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China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) initiative has been developing at a fast pace since its launch a few years ago. Stretching from China to Europe, the SREB encompasses a number of post-Soviet states and adjacent countries that are of strategic and economic importance to Russia. The SREB poses fundamental challenges to Russia's regional and global posture. While opportunities for cooperation with Beijing exist, Moscow has been wary of involvement in China's ambitious initiative.

There were expectations that Vladimir Putin's meeting with Xi Jinping in late June 2016 (Putin's eleventh visit to China) could push the process forward. Although many bilateral agreements were signed at that meeting, the scope of Russia's involvement in the SREB did not significantly change. Russia's unwillingness to pursue wider participation in the initiative is based on many considerations. Among the main factors are Russia's drastic pendulum swings in relations with key associated actors (like Turkey and Iran), its current domestic economic challenges, and its own Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

## What Is The SREB?

The SREB is the land-based component of China's One Belt–One Road (OBOR) project. The Maritime Silk Road (MSR) is the sea-based component. China announced the initiative in Kazakhstan in 2013, refined the concept—with the help of Chinese think tanks established for the very purpose—and began to actively implement it in 2015.

Unlike other large global integration projects such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), the SREB has developed primarily through bilateral (rather than multilateral) agreements and is focused on infrastructure rather than regional integration. The core of the SREB involves railroad construction and railway-related activities—China has been negotiating railway projects with thirty countries. China is involved in roughly 350 international engineering projects related to the project for an estimated \$25 billion and has invested overall roughly \$7 trillion into the plan.

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The SREB is not a "closed" initiative. China looks for global partners and makes appeals for investment. For now, the SREB does not include free-trade zones, though it may eventually. Some observers [suggest](#) that China's slow economic growth will dampen Beijing's enthusiasm to pursue the SREB. However, this looks unlikely since the underlying logic of the project is to expand the market for Chinese goods. The SREB is viewed by the Chinese political and business elite as a key strategic economic tool for the country's socioeconomic development over the next couple of decades.

China makes it difficult for states to refuse SREB projects because it provides vigorous financial guarantees. Though projects are nominally apolitical, Beijing occasionally imposes what look like certain conditionality requirements (for instance, on energy pricing). One positive effect of the project stems from China's interest in stability along SREB routes. This has led it to increased engagement in regional conflict settlement efforts, particularly with regard to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Already, hundreds of Chinese-hired guards are providing security along the pipelines and road construction projects in Pakistan.

### **Russia and the SREB**

Russia's views toward the SREB stem from a mixed bag of political and economic considerations on many levels—national, bilateral, regional, and global. This mix reflects the range of complex and contradictory Russian attitudes toward China: from dramatic forecasts of rampant Chinese expansion into the Far East and Siberia to a future where Russia and China work together as strategic partners overpowering the West's weakening hegemony. Moscow's views are also directly influenced by Russia's degraded relations with the West vis-a-vis the Ukraine conflict and sanctions. At the core, Moscow views Chinese regional policy through the prism of Russia's own efforts to strengthen integration within the post-Soviet space.

Many Russian experts tend to view the project as primarily economic in nature but also part of Beijing's longer-term geopolitical strategy. They see the SREB as China's way of reaching new markets and creating new opportunities but over time, they suspect, Chinese standards, currency, and culture will follow. For the most part, Russian experts regard Russian participation in the SREB as desirable and necessary, not least in response to two global U.S. integrationist projects: the TPP and TTIP. They view the SREB as having a significant impact on geoeconomic and geopolitical regional rebalancing, in which Russia could have a stronger position.

Moscow remains challenged, however, in formulating and defending Russia's political-economic priorities in regard to the project. A central issue is the way in which the SREB challenges Russia's Eurasian integration plans. It is difficult to deny that the SREB offers Russia's EEU partners (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan) a more attractive alternative in practically all industrial, trade, and financial dimensions. EEU members have

established bilateral cooperation agreements with China within the SREB format, to the neglect of the EEU (and Russian integration efforts and norms).

At the root of the discrepancies is the "philosophy" of regional integration. Russia suggests a more protectionist approach for the EEU, a sentiment that has increased as it confronts the effects of sanctions. However, Kazakhstan, for example, which recently outlined a new development concept, sees the EEU as an "open" project and itself as being an unrestricted "bridge" in regional endeavors such as the SREB. Kazakhstan wants to take advantage of any integrationist dividends and not experience restrictions, political or otherwise. Thus, it has not acceded to certain EEU agreements, such as in the liberalization of the services sector or in the auxiliary transportation services sector.

There was a sign of forward motion involving Russia's involvement in May 2015 when a joint [declaration](#) on cooperation between the EEU and the SREB was signed. However, EEU members were hard pressed to elaborate on common next steps.

Russian experts have analyzed options to prevent or neutralize detrimental consequences of the SREB. This includes supporting joint ventures in regions of particular importance for Russia. Another idea is to integrate into the SREB proposed transit initiatives of other regional players like Kazakhstan's "Light Route," Mongolia's "Steppe Route," and South Korea's "Eurasian Initiative." These projects are of incomparably smaller scale than the SREB, but diversifying transit routes, in the Russian outlook, could at least partly balance the Chinese project.

One logistical conundrum for Russia is that the overall orientation of the Chinese project runs from east to west, whereas Russia is more interested in trade routes north to south, corresponding to its own economic development needs. North-south trade corridors also correspond to the interests of Central Asian states, as well as India, Pakistan and Iran. However, Western sanctions on Russia create a serious barrier to the use of Russian territory as a main SREB transit route, even if the ending of sanctions on Iran could revitalize efforts to establish north-south corridors for Russia.

### **The EU and the SREB**

Moscow is keenly watching the reaction of other international actors to the SREB. In particular, it is attentive to the view of the European Union, which is the main destination for SREB cargo. (The EU is still Russia's largest trading partner, even with sanctions.) Brussels is still formulating its position toward the SREB, but European interest in it appears high. To begin with, many EU states are cofounders of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The EU sees the SREB as a supranational endeavor with itself as an equal partner. To facilitate dialogue, an EU-China Connectivity platform was created at the EU-China business summit in June 2015.

Currently, all seven existing railroad routes from China to western Europe go through Poland. Xi [sees](#) Poland as a "gateway to Europe" both by land and sea. During Xi's visit to Poland in June 2016, he and Polish President Andrzej Duda signed an agreement to raise their bilateral state relations to the that of a "comprehensive strategic partnership." The leaders [said](#) they hoped that Sino-Polish projects will have "a major role" in the "economic belt of the Silk Road."

China has also signed memoranda with Lithuania and Hungary. At the same time, Germany (Russia's largest EU trade partner) remains rather reserved. Germany is inclined to view the SREB from geopolitical and security perspectives.

Potentially, the SREB could enhance dialogue between the EU and the EEU, especially if the EU were to seek some kind of counterbalance to both the TTIP and the SREB. This assumption may look unrealistic now, but there was at least an [exchange of such ideas](#) between the heads of the European and Eurasian Commissions last November.

## Conclusion

China is energetically pushing its colossal "silk road" blueprint forward. This is forcing Russia to confront considerable economic, political, and existential challenges. As Russia contends with the sustainability of its own EEU initiative, it has been unable to formulate a comprehensive strategy toward the SREB. Moscow's approach, therefore, is to lean toward bilateral agreements where possible while taking a prudent role as junior partner in the SREB.

# Are China and Russia Teaming Up in Southern Europe?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 479

June 2017

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Southern Europe has been a new area of focus for the Sino-Russian partnership in recent years. Cultural and religious ties with Orthodox majority states have long given Russia a [special role](#) in the region, but China is a newer player. Although each country has its own independent reasons for engaging economically with southern Europe—for China, it is the destination for its Belt and Road Initiative, while for Russia, the region provides a potential alternative to gas supply via Ukraine—increasingly the two countries are pursuing parallel agendas, involving promoting their own interests at the expense of European unity.

## China and Southern Europe

Much of the attention to China's Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013 and initially known as "One Belt, One Road," has focused on China's infrastructure development plans for Central and South Asia, but Southern Europe is a key destination for both the maritime and transcontinental routes. High level [participation](#) in the May 14-15, 2017, Belt and Road Forum from Italy, Greece, Serbia, Spain, and Turkey attests to Southern Europe's interest in developing economic ties with China. Chinese investments there have proceeded somewhat under the radar and in a piecemeal fashion, but they bear scrutiny as the trend toward increased Chinese economic involvement in the region will have important political and security implications for Europe and the United States.

During former Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's visit to Poland in 2012, the Chinese government introduced a new economic initiative, the 16+1 process, which involves investment, concessionary loans, trade promotion, and annual summits in Central and Eastern Europe. The 16 countries involved include 11 EU and 5 non-EU countries from Central Europe and the Baltics.<sup>†</sup> Cooperative projects have been outlined in a series of summits in recent years. In particular, the 2014 Belgrade summit called for a link between the 16+1 process and Chinese funds for investments in the Belt and Road Initiative,

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<sup>†</sup> The EU countries involved are Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Poland, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, and the non-EU are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia. All of the latter except Bosnia Herzegovina are EU candidate countries.

including for rail links and other infrastructure. The 2015 Suzhou summit focused on maritime Silk Road links, connecting China to Europe via the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas. The 2016 summit, which took place in November 2016 in Riga, Latvia, further developed the [Three Seas Initiative](#) to create infrastructure links connecting the three seas.

China's investment in the Greek port of Piraeus, the center of Greece's shipping industry, shows how the Chinese initiative seeks to combine maritime and land-based infrastructure development. The Chinese state-owned company, COSCO, acquired a 35-year concession for the port of Piraeus, which will turn it into a hub for China's trade in Europe. In August 2016, COSCO [bought](#) a 51 percent stake in the port for \$311.5 million and will increase its stake to 67 percent in the next five years, assuming required investments of €300 million (\$326 million) are made. The port will be connected to railroads in Central and Eastern Europe, which the China Railway and Construction Corporation will build by 2017 to create a high-speed rail connection from Piraeus to Budapest. These improvements will reduce shipping times from China to Europe by 10 days—now goods go from Suez Canal through the Mediterranean and then up to the Atlantic coast to Northern European cities; with new connections they will go directly from the Suez Canal (recently doubled in capacity) to Piraeus. Piraeus is the closest European port to the Suez Canal and China has also been investing in Egypt and [Djibouti](#), where it acquired its first naval base and plans to station 10,000 troops.

This is just one example of the recent surge in Chinese investment in southeastern Europe since 2008. Chinese state-owned firms have sought new markets given the slowdown at home and post-crisis opportunities overseas. In addition to investments in transport in Greece, Chinese companies have acquired stakes in many other ports around the [Mediterranean](#), including Genoa, Naples, and Istanbul. Chinese firms have targeted energy projects, mostly in Italy and Portugal. Over the past few years in Portugal 90 percent of investment in sell-offs in the energy sector has come from China, while in Italy China has [become](#) the largest foreign investor in the energy sector, with investment over €4 billion (\$4.35 billion).

### **Russia and Southern Europe**

The economic crisis in Greece initially fueled speculation that Moscow would take advantage of the situation to develop closer ties with Athens. Russian economic woes, actions in Ukraine, and the resulting EU sanctions set limits to any rapprochement, despite a series of meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin following the election of Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsirpas in 2015. Greece's Russian [diplomacy](#), especially in the energy sector, has frustrated European attempts to limit Moscow's efforts to circumvent Ukraine in energy exports to Europe. Moreover, the governing Syriza party in Greece has [criticized](#) the EU's imposition of sanctions on Russia. Indeed Putin's May 2016 visit to Athens was one of the few the Russian President has made to an EU country since the imposition of sanctions in 2014. For its part, Greece has looked to Russia for investment in

newly privatized sectors and the two countries are exploring cooperation in tourism and transportation as well as deepening cultural and religious ties.

After President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan apologized in June 2016 for shooting down a Russian aircraft in Syria, Putin has revived the Turkish Stream project, originally proposed in December 2014, now involving the construction of two underwater gas lines from Russia to Turkey. The two countries signed an agreement on the project in October 2016. After Turkish President Erdoğan's visit to Moscow in August 2016, Turkey proposed connecting Turkish Stream to the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP), which would ship gas from Azerbaijan to the border between Greece and Turkey. Turkish Stream could also be connected to Greece and Italy, via the Poseidon pipeline.

All of this works against [efforts](#) by the EU and the United States to reduce European dependence on Russian gas and prevent Greece from expanding energy cooperation with Russia. The EU has been building a pipeline between Greece and Bulgaria (Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria or ICGB), which would be connected to Azerbaijan's gas fields through the Southern corridor. The pipeline has a reverse flow capability, meaning it can ship gas in either direction, thereby preventing Russia from using gas flows to Europe as political leverage.

Moreover, Russia and Turkey have been developing military cooperation, posing a challenge to NATO unity. As Erdoğan has faced growing criticism for his concentration of political power and wide-scale purges of supposed supporters of the failed coup against him last summer, Turkey has sought to demonstrate that it has other options and drawn closer to Russia. For its part, Russia has [ended the sanctions](#) imposed on Turkey in the aftermath of their shooting of the Russian aircraft and Ankara has opted to [purchase](#) the Russian S-400 missile defense system instead of a comparable U.S.-EU system. The two countries [held](#) joint naval exercises in the Black Sea in early April 2017, just two months after Turkey joined other NATO countries in the [Black Shield 2017](#) naval exercise in the region.

### **Sino-Russian Coordination?**

Thus far, China and Russia have been involved in parallel efforts to engage Greece and Turkey, but they have not coordinated their policies. In the long term, if Greece and Turkey develop their economic cooperation/integration with BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), there may be some opportunity for coordination. Any future coordination between the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Belt and Road Initiative may provide opportunity for some joint efforts in southern Europe, but this would assume that countries from the region are willing and able to cooperate with the EEU, which is unrealistic at present. Turkey is currently the only Southern European country to be involved with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), though still only as a dialogue partner.



## BRICS

In 2015, Russia invited Greece to join the BRICS New Development Bank, just as Greece was in the midst of economic negotiations with the EU. It seemed unlikely that Greece could come up with the \$10 billion euros required of founding members as it struggled to emerge from economic crisis, but in the end Athens came to terms with the EU and never joined BRICS.

By contrast, Turkey, which has been described as a near-BRICS state, has never been invited to join and has never expressed interest in doing so. Unlike Greece, Turkey does not face the constraint of EU membership though both are NATO members. As one Turkish analyst [argued](#), if Turkey joined BRICS it would be reframing itself as a revisionist power. In the aftermath of the political shifts in Turkey since the July 2016 coup attempt, this may seem like a more attractive prospect, but there are no indications that BRICS membership for Turkey is likely.

## Eurasian Economic Union-Belt and Road Initiative

The agreement last year to integrate the EEU and the Belt and Road Initiative has yet to translate into a concrete agenda for cooperation. Given China's related infrastructure investments in southern Europe, if Greece and Turkey joined the EEU in some capacity, as some Russian officials have [proposed](#), this could create a basis for coordination between Russia and China. However, Greece's membership in the EU and Turkey's customs agreement with it now prevent the two from pursuing such a course of action.

## Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

Turkey became an SCO dialogue partner in 2012 and since then President Erdoğan has periodically expressed interest in [membership](#), though no formal application has yet been made. SCO members unanimously [elected](#) Turkey to chair the SCO's Energy Club in 2017, the first time a non-member has been granted this role. China has welcomed the possibility of Turkish membership in the SCO and has sought to [pressure](#) Turkey to restrict the political activities of its Uyghur minority.

Public opinion in Turkey appears divided between East and West. One year before the July 2016 coup attempt, the Pew Research Center [reported](#) that 55 percent of respondents favored EU membership, though 47 percent stated that Turkey should not participate in any NATO action against Russia. Interestingly, considering that Turkey is a long-time NATO ally, both Russia and Iran receive higher favorability ratings than the United States or the EU. In the aftermath of the wide-scale arrests since the coup and EU criticism of human rights violations in Turkey, the likelihood of its membership in the EU has further diminished.

Greece, also a NATO member, is not affiliated with the SCO. However, Greece and Russia have discussed some military cooperation in recent years, though this would only be possible if sanctions were lifted. In July 2016, Athens and Moscow [explored](#) the possibility of co-producing Kalashnikov rifles in Greece. In 2015, they also [discussed](#) Greece's potential purchase of missiles for the S-300 missile defense system it acquired from Cyprus in the late 1990s.

### Implications

China and Russia are pursuing parallel agendas to cooperate economically with southern European countries such as Greece and Turkey. These efforts come at a time of economic and political crisis within the EU and within the context of ongoing sanctions against Russia over Ukraine. While the Russian and Chinese policies have different motives, their parallel efforts together compound certain problems for the EU and the United States.

- Maintaining Ukraine's role as a gas transit country: the EU has opposed efforts by Russia to build gas pipelines that circumvent Ukraine, such as Turkish Stream.
- Keeping EU countries united on sanctions against Russia: Greece has been critical of sanctions and Moscow has sought to use its ties to Athens to erode EU unity on the policy.
- Preventing individual companies from controlling European infrastructure: China's majority stake in Piraeus has fueled concern in the EU about the ability of a company to exert monopoly control over a port or other infrastructure.
- Accelerating China's transformation into a global naval power: the growth of China's economic interests in the Mediterranean region has led to greater investments in ports in the region and the development of China's first naval base in Djibouti.

The EU has faced a multitude of threats on its peripheries, including waves of migration from the Middle East and Africa and economic crisis. The parallel efforts by Russia and China to engage these countries create new concerns about the unity of the EU and NATO. Moreover, in light of the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, the commitment of the United States to either organization may be subject to review given Trump's stated view that U.S. allies take economic advantage of the United States.

It is possible that Russian and Chinese efforts to engage southern Europe develop a competitive dimension, at least over infrastructure investments. The weakness of the Russian economy, however, will set limits to Russian efforts and may lead to some coordinated efforts with Beijing to invest in European infrastructure, assuming these investments serve the needs



of both the EEU and the Belt and Road Initiative. Such coordination in southern Europe may finally provide some concrete evidence of the cooperation between the two initiatives.

Moreover, the appeal of Russian and Chinese overtures to southern European states may wane. Already there are indications that European countries are [concerned](#) about some of the consequences of Chinese investment through the 16+1 framework, including the required use of Chinese sub-contractors and purchases of Chinese-made equipment, as well as rising European trade deficits with China. Given Russia's economic crisis, it [appears](#) over-committed by opting to construct two other major gas pipelines in addition to Turkish Stream: Nordstream that connects the Baltics to Germany, and Power of Siberia that connects Russia to China. If Turkey aims to be a [gas hub](#), this will lead it to avoid excessive dependence on Russia, from which it now receives 56.3 percent of its gas, even though relations between the two are now much improved.

# Does North Korea Have A Place in Russia's "Turn to the East"?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 428

May 2016

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What are the prospects for Russian-North Korean relations today? Ruled by a harsh totalitarian regime, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or North Korea, is one of the world's most isolated countries. In addition to China, Russia is one of its few outlets for international political and economic relations. North Korea and Russia share a short, 17-kilometer, land border and have historically maintained trade relations. As Russia attempts to "turn to the east" as one strategy for combating its own international isolation, relations between Moscow and Pyongyang could become closer. The two states have been exploring projects that would be mutually beneficial. In engaging with North Korea, Russia's ultimate goal is to create a trans-Korea transportation link that would enable it to increase its economic activity with South Korea, one of Russia's top ten global trade partners. The plan's appeal to the North would be modernization of transportation infrastructure and cash flow from transit fees. However, major obstacles stand in the way.

## **The Hot and Cold History of Russian-North Korean Relations**

Decisive Soviet military and political support helped create North Korea in 1948. After the Korean War (1950-53) ended in a stalemate thanks to large-scale Chinese military assistance to Pyongyang, North Korea balanced its relations with Moscow and Beijing until the end of the 1980s. During that time, Soviet-North Korean cooperation rested on ideological closeness and lavish financial help and technical assistance.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia adhered to a pro-Western policy toward the Koreans. In the first half of the 1990s, Moscow officially framed North Korea as an ideologically unfriendly state that posed a range of threats to Russia. Russia was worried about North Korean smuggling of nuclear materials and technologies, drug trafficking, and crime and contract killings on Russian territory. Moscow also asked North Korea to pay back its multibillion debts and ceased providing it with large-scale financial, technical, and humanitarian assistance. In response, Pyongyang reduced to a minimum its diplomatic contacts with Moscow. North Korea was not in a position to make foreign

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payments, and it had a very narrow range of goods and services to offer. Accordingly, Russian-North Korean trade turnover collapsed, going from \$2.35 billion in 1988 to just \$85 million in 1996. Russia continued to sell some raw materials and equipment to North Korea while receiving a steady supply of cheap labor. Some in Russia and the West considered this exchange a form of slavery, as the overtaxed workers received tiny salaries (even by Russian standards) and often lived in camp conditions supervised by North Korean officials. The North Korean supervisors had extraterritorial powers to maintain discipline within the camps, prevent defections, and bring violators back to North Korea.

Bilateral relations partially improved in the second half of the 1990s when Moscow decided to take a more equidistant approach toward North and South Korea with the hope of being able to benefit from mediation and reconciliation efforts.

One potentially promising development during this time was the Rajin-Sonbong Economic Special Zone (later known as Rason), established in 1991. It was centered around the North Korean port of Rajin, close to Russia and China, and it offered relaxed rules for foreign investors. The project developed slowly, however, because Pyongyang periodically changed the zone's legal status and development strategy. While Russia was interested in continuing to use the port of Rajin for cargo shipments, it was not able to provide much investment. Over time, it became dominated by China.

In the 2000s, after Vladimir Putin came to power, bilateral relations improved dramatically. One of the main incentives for Putin's rapprochement policy was his designs for a transportation corridor between Russia and South Korea through North Korea. The idea was to link South Korea to the Trans-Siberian Railway, thereby offering a highly attractive westward route for Korean and Asia-Pacific cargo and enabling Russia to sell gas and electricity to South Korea. North Korea would benefit from infrastructure modernization and transit fees. Initially, North Korea gave its consent and the project developed quickly. However, the North Korean rail system was found to be in far worse condition than expected. Furthermore, Pyongyang began to impose inconvenient conditions. Despite setbacks, there was great hope for years that the project could succeed.

From 2006, new tensions between North and South Korea placed the project firmly on hold. For South Korea, any investment in a trans-Korean transport corridor became highly problematic. Bilateral relations between Russia and North Korea also deteriorated: Russia condemned the North's nuclear program and missile tests and supported UN sanctions against Pyongyang in 2006. Russia was then hit by the 2008-2009 economic crisis.

Russian-North Korean trade turnover, which has always been overwhelmingly composed of Russian exports, reached its post-Soviet peak of almost \$210 million in 2006. It then dropped to \$45 million in 2009, before recovering to around \$110 million in 2011-2012. It has since dropped again, to about \$92 million in 2014 and \$63 million in 2015. By comparison, Chinese-North Korean trade turnover was over \$6 billion in 2013.

A few positive developments in bilateral relations occurred during this time. Over 2008-2014, Russia made large investments into the reconstruction of the railway from the Russian-North Korean border to the port of Rajin/Rason for \$171 million and constructed a cargo terminal there for \$109 million. In 2012, Moscow agreed to write off 90 percent of North Korea's \$10 billion debt and invest the remaining \$1 billion into North Korean infrastructure projects. Then, in 2013, Russia tripled its quota for North Korean labor immigrants—a move that exceeded even the Soviet maximum—allowing for almost fifty thousand North Koreans to work in Russia in 2015. However, the quota was apparently not filled because of diminished demand due to Russia's worsening economic condition. At the start of 2016, the [estimated number](#) of North Korean workers (primarily in construction, logging, and agriculture) was about thirty thousand.

### **Recent Moscow-Pyongyang "Politics"**

The Russia-Ukraine conflict and ensuing breakdown in relations with the West created fertile ground for Russia's further rapprochement with North Korea. Both countries need political allies in order to overcome their isolation and excessive dependence on their main economic partners—the EU for Russia and China for North Korea.

North Korea was among only 11 states that voted in March 2014 against a UN resolution condemning Russia's annexation of Crimea. In its turn, Russia was among the few countries that voted against 2014 and 2015 UN resolutions that condemned the grave human rights violations in North Korea and called for international criminal investigations. Russia took some other steps to highlight its interest in closer bilateral relations. One was the decision to celebrate a Russian-North Korean "Year of Friendship" in 2015. Another was Russia's agreement to a highly controversial (and UN-criticized) [extradition treaty](#) that returns North Korean refugees in Russia to North Korea. There was also an increase in mutual visits by senior officials throughout 2014-15.

North Korea's dependence on China places a certain limitation on Russian-North Korean rapprochement. This was exemplified in May 2015 when North Korean President Kim Jong-un agreed to attend Russia's Victory Day Parade, which most foreign leaders boycotted. He changed his mind at the last minute, however, and did not attend. [According](#) to Russian political observer Vassily Golovin, this was due to his fear of irritating Beijing; Jong-un did not want to jeopardize relations with China by going to Moscow and meeting the Chinese leader there without having first done so in Beijing.

On the whole, Moscow tries to keep equidistant to the two Koreas, as South Korea retains great economic importance. While no visible progress in the six-party talks for the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula was achieved in 2014 or 2015, Russia continues to moderately criticize both countries—Pyongyang for its nuclear arms and missile tests and Seoul for its overreliance on U.S. military assistance. Moscow argues that the North-South conflict could be resolved on the basis of multilateral security guarantees and a diminished

U.S. military presence. Moscow would prefer to deal with a single Korean state or, at least, to have the two Koreas reconcile. In the meantime, Moscow will continue its balancing act.

### **Recent Moscow-Pyongyang "Economics"**

Despite the low trade turnover between Russia and North Korea, there are some new bilateral trends and agreements that hold promise for an increase in cooperation.

First, Russia and North Korea concluded two ambitious investment deals in October 2014 and January 2015 worth billions of dollars over the course of a few decades. These projects envisage the modernization of North Korea's railways and electrical networks in exchange for Russian access to North Korea's rare and non-ferrous metals and [high-quality coal](#). These projects would give Russia the opportunity to upgrade North Korean railways for use in a trans-Korean network. According to government officials, they could also boost bilateral trade turnover to as much as \$1 billion by 2020. China has had such "barter trade" projects with North Korea for some time, involving the exchange of Chinese goods and technologies for mineral and labor resources.

Second, a year after putting into operation the Khasan-Rajin railway, Russia started to use the Rajin terminal to export its own coal in November 2014 (predominantly to China). Russian coal supplies via Rajin to South Korea were irregular and suspended in March 2016. Such supplies were a symbolically important step toward the creation of a transportation bridge between Russia and South Korea.

Third, in October 2015, Russia and North Korea announced an intent to establish an Asian Trading House. Among its main purposes is the intensification of direct bilateral business contacts and elimination of intermediaries. In particular, China [allegedly re-exports](#) Russian goods to North Korea worth \$900 million annually. Even if this figure is exaggerated, switching to direct contacts would significantly contribute to the two countries' bilateral trade turnover.

There remain significant obstacles to implementing Russia's ambitious plans, however. Poor relations between North and South Korea seriously reduce the possibility of any large-scale trans-Korean transportation projects (as, for example, with South Korea's suspension of coal imports via Rajin).

Russian investment also remains vulnerable to Pyongyang's capriciousness and the instability of Russian-North Korean relations. Moscow condemned North Korea's hydrogen bomb test this January and a space satellite launch (believed to be part of its ballistic missile development program) the following month. It followed this by supporting a UN resolution introducing severe economic sanctions against the North in March 2016. Russia supported the resolution on the condition that it would not affect its

own coal exports via Rajin. Russia thus reserved the right to continue using the railway and port infrastructure that it had been modernizing.

Finally, there remain a host of structural impediments. These include Russia's own economic problems, North Korea's faulty economic management, the poor state of its transportation infrastructure, and the low capacity of Russian-North Korean crossborder transit.

## **Conclusion**

In Russia's "turn to the east," North Korea could play a role. Primarily, Russia seeks trade relations with North Korea as a bridge to connect with South Korea, which Moscow considers (together with Japan) as the most viable counterweight to Chinese economic influence in the Far East. In terms of bilateral relations, however, North Korea's role remains limited. In international politics, any vote from Pyongyang that is pro-Russia is useful, but Moscow is not in a position to give Pyongyang similar support. It is reluctant to excessively irritate Seoul and Beijing and itself remains wary of North Korea's more dangerous actions. At the same time, even if Russian-financed projects move forward and Moscow and Pyongyang boost their bilateral trade, North Korea would still not be on Russia's list of vital global economic partners.



## **VI. Russia's Involvement in Syria and Its Implications**





# Can Russia's Peace Plan for Syria Work?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 420

February 2016

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When it comes to Russia's geopolitics, the international community has a lot to grumble about. In the course of a few short years, Moscow annexed Crimea, fueled a civil war in eastern Ukraine, dismantled its relations with Turkey, and embarked on a unilateral military campaign in Syria. As Russia's military operations in Syria intensified, European Council President Donald Tusk warned that Moscow's actions would "only result in a new wave of refugees," U.S. President Barack Obama claimed that Russian President Vladimir Putin was getting "involved in another quagmire," and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that Russian airstrikes are "undermining the effort to find a political solution to the conflict." And as Russia expert Dmitry Gorenburg has [noted](#), the Syria campaign reveals a dramatic rise in Moscow's military capabilities, a demonstration that will do little to soothe international worries.

Moscow is geopolitically heavy-handed, and this makes it difficult to acknowledge that Russia's twin strategy of bombing-while-peace-planning stands a decent chance to end nearly five years of civil war. For all its brutality, the Russian approach in Syria may accomplish two goals that are necessary for a negotiated peace. At the international level, it is forcing a very divided international community to come together grudgingly in search of a settlement, while on the ground in Syria, it is whittling down the number of fractious rebel groups and parties whose signatures will eventually affirm a peace accord.

Coverage of Russia's peace plan in the United States, Europe, and many parts of the Middle East often leads with frames of an aggressive and unpredictable Russia "calling the shots," foisting its own peace plan on an unwitting international community. Yet if the plan gives us the best chance to end a conflict that has killed over 400,000, dispersed four million refugees to other countries and given birth to the Islamic State, worrying about who authored it seems an immoral luxury.

## **How Civil Wars End**

Scholars of civil wars have long since uncovered a paradox: the international community favors negotiated settlements to civil wars even though such settlements are less durable

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than outright victory by one side. Since the end of the Cold War, the percentage of civil wars that have ended via negotiation has [jumped](#) from 10 to 40 percent. As political scientist Barbara Walter [reasoned](#) bluntly, such an approach goes against seventy years of learning on civil wars, particularly so in Syria where the landscape is littered with over a dozen major rebel groups.

Still, negotiated settlements can work, especially when they leave fewer opposition voices to shout across the bargaining table and when they give combatants something to lose should they choose to keep fighting. But this requires an outside force willing and able to hurt one or more warring parties enough to make negotiations an attractive option. NATO's bombing campaign in Serbia in 1999 is often cited as an example where force was used to engineer a negotiated peace. In the case of Tajikistan's civil war in the 1990s, a peace accord required years of negotiations and shuttle diplomacy between incumbents and a nominally united opposition of political parties and warlords. At the same time, Russia and other states did not shy away from militarily assisting the government enough to deflate the opposition's confidence to keep boots in the battlefield.

The dogged diplomacy that the Obama administration favors as a path to a negotiated solution was never enough, as I [noted](#) in a previous PONARS policy memo, given the disunited and competitive approach of an international community of stakeholders whose mediation efforts were little more than a proxy vote for or against Assad. Russia's current approach to Syria combines both the dogged diplomacy that U.S. officials favor with dogged force for which there is little appetite in the West.

### **The Russian Plan Unfolds**

In November 2015, a Russian delegation handed skeptical international and UN officials its own peace plan for the Syrian conflict. Russia's 8-point peace plan met lots of skepticism and was overshadowed by the military operations in and over Syria that the Kremlin commenced in the previous September. Nonetheless, UN Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura channeled his optimistic side: "Think about where we were a few months ago. We never imagined we would have the Russian Federation and the [U.S.] heading the same table" noting that the round of talks had generated enough momentum to keep discussions going.

Mistura was perhaps overemphasizing the extent to which such progress was unforeseen. Russian officials had been openly critical of the failure of diplomacy and the deadlock in the international community about how to end the Syria crisis; indeed, throughout 2014, three major peace plans vied for attention and international sponsorship while the war raged. By the close of the year, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov indicated that things would be different going forward: "There won't be a Geneva II. If you think that a conference will be announced similar to the one that was held in...January this year with

the participation of 50-odd states, thousands of journalists, bright lights, there won't be such a conference."

Lavrov's words, for the most part, proved true. While Geneva II remains alive, Russia's diplomatic and military actions in Syria in 2015 would reboot the international community's approach. In rapid succession, Russia commenced operations in Syria, leaked the 8-point plan to maximize the attention of international diplomats, and used its plan as a script for intense discussions with U.S. and international officials before a lightly modified version was presented to the United Nations and approved by a Security Council [resolution](#). The plan recognizes seventeen countries as part of the peace effort and sets a timetable for a ceasefire and political process aimed at reaching an accord to end the war.

### **Taking Stock**

To date, the Russian plan has achieved a number of outcomes on the ground in Syria and in high-level diplomatic circles. On the ground, Russia's bombing campaign and military assistance has resuscitated the fortunes of a beleaguered regime. By December 2015, pro-government forces recaptured towns in western Syria; pushed rebel forces away from pro-Assad coastal strongholds; gained rural territory in the north; and retook military bases around Aleppo and Damascus. By the first part of February 2016, pro-government forces had besieged rebel-held parts of Aleppo and had come within 25 kilometers of the Turkish border. Observers noted that the majority of Russian military operations were aimed not at the Islamic State but at other rebel groups, including those in parts of the country who were working with Western support and surprised to be the target of Russian bombs.

But such observations missed the more critical dynamics Russia put into play. Moscow boosted the morale of Assad forces enough to prevent their collapse and aid their advances, but it has stopped far short of giving Assad pretensions that his forces can attain outright victory despite his advances in Aleppo. It has done the reverse to rebel forces, chipping away at their ranks and giving them unprecedented urgency to join diplomatic efforts before their losses mount further. Russia's military campaign is a forcing function that backs up a key point of the peace plan now under UN imprimatur—less fighting, more talking between pro-government groups and whatever opposition groups are left. While opposition representatives walked out of talks at Geneva in early February 2016—citing Russian bombing among several reasons—de Mistura explained that such bumps are to be expected: "It is not the end and it is not the failure of the talks. They came and they stayed. Both sides insisted on the fact that they are interested in having a political process started."

At the international level, the plan lays out a clear timetable for a ceasefire and constitutional process to be led by the United Nations and shepherded by the seventeen-member International Syria Support Group. While the number of members may seem large, it is far smaller than the larger informal groupings of past years. The shrunken group

is also more likely to reach a minimal consensus, in part because of the intensive shuttle diplomacy between key members. The lion's share of media attention in the West has gone to meetings between Russian and U.S. officials, but Russian backroom talks with smaller powers seem just as decisive. With Jordan, a state with which Russia often sees eye-to-eye, Russian diplomats crafted a list that excludes a large number of Syrian rebel groups and brands them as terrorists. With Qatar, a state that has sponsored less-moderate Sunni rebel groups, Russia has engaged in respectful summitry to cushion the blow to Doha's Syria policy and has likely signaled to Qatari officials that they will not stand in the way of Assad stepping down eventually. Likewise, Russian officials displayed a degree of flexibility in their thornier relations with Saudi Arabia and indicated they would neither object to the participation of certain groups that are part of the Saudi-backed High Negotiations Committee in peace talks nor would it remove them from its list of terror groups.

At the time of this memo's publication, the main stumbling block is likely to be the distance between Moscow's and Ankara's views on the Democratic Union Party, or PYD, the main Kurdish rebel force in Syria. Moscow insists on including the PYD in talks while Ankara demands its exclusion as a terror group. Russian officials have given few signs that they will accommodate Turkish concerns, a position that goes too far in punishing Turkey for shooting down a Russian military jet in November 2015 and which ultimately risks growing international consensus on Syria.

The peace plan envisions ceasefires between the regime and the opposition in six months' time and multiple rounds of talks toward the drafting of a new constitution based on "credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance" within eighteen months. While the timelines are overly optimistic, the process is attainable and formulaic, keeping with internationally accepted conflict resolution modalities. And it is backed up with the implicit understanding that Russia reserves the option to keep bombing those who do not come to the table soon.

### **A More Civil Civil War**

Weary after years of unpleasant geopolitical surprises, many international policymakers will continue to insist that Russia's actions will trigger more global terrorism, or that the Kremlin has pretensions to become a shaper of the new Middle East while overshadowing the havoc it fueled in Ukraine and that Putin is hell-bent on saving Assad. On the last point, Samuel Charap and Jeremy Shapiro have recently [argued](#) in *Foreign Affairs* that the United States should focus less on a settlement and more on creating "a rift between Russia and the Assad regime and to pull Russia closer to its own position."

Instead, we would do better to take Russia's Syria plan on its own terms, recognize that it is the best option on offer, and proactively troubleshoot obstacles that will inevitably fall in its path. In that regard, several cautions are necessary.

First, the violence in Syria will continue. Ceasefires do not happen seamlessly nor do they remain unbroken. The international community, teams of mediators, and units of peacekeepers will need to be at the ready to restore ceasefires that are bound to break down. Russian mediators and military units witnessed this firsthand during the Tajik civil war in the 1990s, where ceasefires collapsed numerous times and the violence continued for three years after talks between the government and a united opposition had commenced. Such violence was sometimes directed at CIS peacekeepers, Russian troops, and UN observers. In one particularly grizzly period, eight Russian troops were killed and their bodies mutilated and a unit of Kazakh peacekeepers was ambushed and twenty of its soldiers killed. Only countries that can politically cope with such losses should send in peacekeepers and mediators to ensure the longevity of ceasefires.

Second, major tensions will emerge during the course of negotiations and talks to form a transition government and constitutional process. But the source of tensions and breakdowns will not only be between government and opposition negotiators; an equally important factor may be the distance between Russia, the West, and countries in the Middle East on what Syria's post-conflict government and constitution will look like. While Western policymakers will insist on principles of democracy and elections, Russian officials will focus on elite-level deals and political formulas in the government, an approach to state-building abroad that Russia has long [favored](#) according to Yulia Nikitina. Such an approach does not require a democratic regime but it does allow space for opposition forces to be part of the government from the national to the local levels. Before rejecting such an approach, we would do well to keep in mind what happened in Afghanistan and Iraq when international policymakers decided to foster procedural and electoral democracy over less formal principals of political inclusion.

Third, the international community and Syria's national, provincial, and local elites will need a common vision of the country's future. Sadly, this vision has to be utterly minimalist, framed largely by what most everyone wishes to avoid. If this means averting another civil war or the formal breakup of the country, then we have to acknowledge that the best we can hope for in Syria is a worse version of Lebanon, a country where a quarter-century after civil war sectarian elites, parties, and militias continue to carve power amongst themselves, fix quotas in public bodies, and provide laughably minimal services. But poverty, paralysis, and sectarian segregation would be a huge improvement from the current death and destruction in Syria.



## Russia's Policy on Syria after the Start of Military Engagement

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 421

February 2016

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In the fall of 2015, Russia resolved to raise the stakes in Syria by launching an air campaign at the [request](#) of Damascus. The intervention was partly driven by considerations directly related to the Middle East, including concerns about stability in this region neighboring Eurasia and linkages to domestic terrorist threats.<sup>†</sup> But Moscow also launched its operation in pursuit of major instrumental goals. First, it saw an opportunity through its engagement in Syria to push Russia to the forefront of international politics. Countering Daesh (ISIS/ISIL) and violent jihadism in the region was a rare concern Russia shared with the West at a time of deeply strained Russian-Western relations. Moscow also aimed to overcome the repercussions of the Russia-Ukraine crisis with a more ambitious security agenda of greater international importance.

As of early 2016, it can be said that Russia has largely met its minimal set of original instrumental goals. By upgrading its role in Syria, Russia appeared to receive much of what it sought. It compelled the United States to talk to it “as an equal” while moving Ukraine/Crimea issues to the relative background. There is, furthermore, little doubt now about Russia's overall return to the Middle East. Diplomatic cooperation with the United States on Syria restarted and intensified, as marked particularly by the announcement of the partial ceasefire (excluding Daesh and al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra) that the United States and Russia brokered and which is scheduled to begin at the end of February.

At the same time, there has been no major progress on more ambitious goals that Moscow might have hoped to pursue via its Syria engagement. These could have included the lifting of some or most Western sanctions, getting relations with the West fully back on track, or securing a more radical tradeoff between Syria and the Donbas (Ukraine). Furthermore, Russia's grand plans for a joint antiterrorist coalition with the West did not pan out. The revival of functional cooperation on Syria with the United States and certain European states cannot be mistaken for a full normalization in relations. For years to come, such cooperation will be lower than it was in the previous decade.

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<sup>†</sup> See: Ekaterina Stepanova, “[The “Islamic State” as a Security Problem for Russia: The Nature and Scale of the Threat](#),” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 393, October 2015.



Similarly, on the ground in Syria, Russia's minimal goals have also largely been met. Russian forces have "corrected" the military balance by helping Bashar al-Assad's government survive and even expand areas under its control. In doing so, it has helped stave off the possible "Somalization" of Syria or its total takeover by jihadist groups. That said, in the complex, fragmented, deeply divisive, and heavily transnationalized context of the Syrian civil war, Russian air strikes, already running short of targets by early 2016, could hardly lead to an overwhelming shift of fortunes on the ground, underscoring the centrality of a political solution.

The following sections explore the evolution of Russia's military campaign, Moscow's approach to a political settlement, and the mutual effects of, on the one hand, Russia's involvement in Syria, and, on the other, changing international and regional conditions.

### **The Evolution of Russia's Military Operation in Syria**

In late 2015–early 2016, Russia's military campaign in Syria involved two main components. The first were air strikes against jihadist military targets, including not only Daesh but all major militant groups (including Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Jaish al-Islam) whose primary goal is to impose an Islamist order in Syria by violent means. The second component, since October 2015, involved measured but significant attacks on oil smuggling infrastructure.

As Russia's operation evolved, two issues became especially contentious and were heavily exploited by regional and Western media and states upset by Russia's engagement. One was whether Russia's operation was anti-Daesh or more broadly anti-opposition—including against non-jihadist armed opponents of Assad. By now, however, it is clear that all serious anti-government military activity is conducted by jihadist groups, whereas what is left of the Free Syrian Army are mostly local militias defending their towns or districts. The problem is that jihadists are often based and operate next to other armed groups, making it hard to distinguish between them militarily (especially from the air). This is also a major complicating factor for the February ceasefire.

Another contentious issue has been civilian casualties. Russian air strikes appear to have been relatively well targeted, according to regular and verifiable data [provided](#) by the Russian Ministry of Defense. In the context of intense information warfare, Russia should have been prepared for its opponents to blow the issue of civilian casualties out of proportion (especially in the case of Gulf-based international media and émigré NGOs like the London-based one-man Syrian Observatory for Human Rights). However, no modern warfare can avoid "collateral" civilian damage in principle. The issue of civilian casualties may become more problematic for Russia as it runs out of identifiable military targets.

Considering these developments, Russia's fulfillment of its basic operational tasks, and the inherent limits to what air strikes can achieve, in early 2016 the Russian campaign acquired

two new angles: 1) open engagement with so-called “patriotic” elements of the Syrian armed opposition in the fight against jihadists and 2) the launching of a proper Russian humanitarian operation. While Russia [claimed coordination](#) with 11 rebel formations (up to 7,000 fighters), this was largely confined in practice to Kurdish formations, some groups aligned to the Kurds, Syriac (Nestorian Christian) paramilitaries, and select Arab Sunni militias such as Jaish al-Thuwar. This is hardly surprising, given the weakness and extreme disparate nature of non-fundamentalist rebels on the ground.

The launch of Russia's humanitarian campaign and increased pressure on the Assad government to allow the United Nations and aid agencies access to besieged towns were more politically significant and substantial steps, even as Russia's humanitarian role remains disproportionately low compared to its level of involvement. Still, it helped to highlight the plight of civilians not only on the opposition side but also in places such as Kafriya and al-Fuah (Shia enclaves in Idlib) or the mixed area of Deir ez-Zor, all under blockade and suffering an acute humanitarian crisis. Most importantly, both angles underscore that the military operation is not an end in itself, as the primary goal has been to back intensified efforts to reach a political settlement.

### **Russia and the Syrian Political Settlement**

The United States and many other Western governments have long shared the belief that it is possible to achieve a united Syria that is both democratic and secular. This concept has been smashed by reality across the Middle East. Such an ideologically shaped vision fails to capture Syria's basic sociopolitical structure, similar to that of most Middle Eastern societies. One layer is composed of internationalized elites and the local analogue of a middle class (parts of which indeed aspire to Western-style democracy). This layer, however, is thin and isolated from a massive lower layer formed by a disenfranchised majority population that leads a dire traditional (or “retraditionalized”) life and, whenever given a vote, goes Islamist. These two layers largely evolve in parallel and there are few institutions (such as the armed forces in Egypt) that can provide some links between them. As a result, a “democratic” revolution today is doomed to morph into an Islamist one; a “democratic” Syria can only be an “Islamist” Syria, much like “democratic” Egypt inevitably came to be ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood, prompting intervention by the country's armed forces.

In terms of process, Russia fully supports the political transition framework outlined by UN Security Council [Resolution 2254](#). In terms of substantive political arrangements, however, Moscow generally prefers to hide behind the mantra that Syria's political future should be solely “the choice of the Syrian people.” This diplomatic cliché does not mean that Russia lacks ideas about the political structure of postwar Syria. But its point of departure is what is feasible, rather than the promotion of ready-made solutions based on specific ideological models.

While Russian ideas are not easy to discern and are rarely made public, a hint of their general direction can be discerned on the basis of official and expert comment. These can be summarized in four main points:

(1) Russia concedes that a more pluralistic system is a must. This is a basic condition to ensure the unity of Syria, a goal that Moscow shares with the UN and the United States, even if it does not share the Western belief that Syria can transition to Western-style liberal democracy. Moscow is also suspicious about calls for Syrian democracy by deeply undemocratic Gulf states that claim to support democracy in Syria but are really using democratization as a fig leaf to advance Islamist rule. In Russia's view, a more realistic and workable way to incorporate elements of pluralism and democracy in Syria is to ensure better representation of different regions and communities through decentralization. The optimal form and degree of decentralization falls somewhere between two extremes: a unitary state following the Assad/Baath model, which is no longer feasible, and full compartmentalization along the lines of Lebanon's quota system.

(2) Moscow views the Syrian armed forces as the most (if not only) functional and organized national institution. Russia might support an even more central role for the military in a postwar settlement. This is especially if the current peace process fails, which could happen due to intransigence by Assad and his followers and the failure of opposition elements to accept each other and the rest of the country (not to mention direct spoiling by jihadist forces). A secular cross-sectarian government run by a former military commander might be a better alternative than endless war, political deadlock, and the further disintegration of the state. In such a scenario, non-jihadist rebel formations, especially from the south (for instance, Jordanian-backed), could be incorporated into the military establishment.

This arrangement would not have to strictly follow the Egyptian model under General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, which excludes even the moderate part of the Muslim Brotherhood. In Syria, such elements can and should be part of the political system on the condition that they recognize the secular nature of the state. Such an arrangement in Syria would likely gain Egyptian support, which could benefit Moscow politically (on top of its existing good relations with Cairo) by underlining that its involvement in the region rests above the Sunni-Shia divide. The next U.S. administration could tolerate or even provide tacit support for such a model in Syria and even use it to improve relations with Egypt.

(3) The question of Assad's departure is no longer a substantive one, even if it is still put forward by armed and émigré opposition groups and their main foreign backers in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey. It has instead increasingly become a technicality, especially in the Russia-U.S. context. A calculated leak by the U.S. administration in January 2016 about best-case scenarios for the departure of Assad and his inner circle (in a year or year-and-a-half, but before Syrian presidential elections) could reflect a degree of emerging

compromise. In case Assad stubbornly refuses to depart, there still remains the option of a military-based transition.

(4) Russia is likely to keep naval and air bases in Syria, perhaps on modified terms, depending on the future political configuration of the state. To the extent this presence could serve as an additional security guarantee for minorities such as Christians and Alawites, it could formally or informally be made part of a final deal, preferably as part of a broader international force.

### **The Broader International and Regional Context**

In terms of changes in the international and regional environment since the start of Russia's military operation, a certain balance has emerged between negative and positive trends, both for the prospects of resolving the conflict in Syria and with regard to Russia's particular interests and concerns. More positive trends can be seen in the broader international context, especially in the Russia-US and UN formats, while more negative ones manifest themselves mainly at the regional level.

#### *Russia-US Dialogue on Syria*

A certain easing of tensions has occurred in Russia's relations with the United States and the West in recent months—resulting directly and primarily from Russia's radically increased leverage in Syria and the pressing need for diplomatic interaction on both sides. Russia's military involvement served as a catalyst to help wake Washington up from its inertia and procrastination on Syria and Iraq—not only to reactivate the fight against Daesh but also to increase diplomatic activity in search of a political solution for Syria. US-Russia dialogue was central to producing and ensuring the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 calling for a ceasefire and political settlement in Syria, as well as the first round of the new Geneva talks. This dialogue, including at the most senior (presidential) policy level, produced the first international agreement on a partial ceasefire in Syria this month.

#### *Saudi Arabia-Iran Tensions*

In contrast, regional developments have been producing new challenges. One such challenge has been the increase in tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The 2015 window of opportunity created by the Iran nuclear deal, paralleled by a degree of legitimization for Iran's regional role (especially in Iraq), and generational change in Saudi leadership was shut in early 2016 by a sharp rise in tension between the two states. This has reinforced the Sunni-Shia divide in the region, which can pose a greater problem than Russia-West tensions or even the Russia-Turkey rift for negotiations and the search for a political solution in Syria. At the same time, this could open additional diplomatic venues

for Russia, as it remains much easier for the Saudis and Qataris to discuss Syria with Russia than with Iran.

### *The Effects of the Russia-Turkey Rift*

As for the Russia-Turkey crisis that began in late 2015, Moscow's direct security involvement in Syria certainly spoiled Turkish President Recep Erdoğan's "Syria game." Turkey's stance has been driven by Ankara's Islamist solidarity and regional ambitions, as well as the latter's instrumentalization by the president and the AKP in their domestic struggle for power. Russia spoiled Turkey's game by helping the Syrian government survive, expand its area of control, and, along with parallel efforts by Syrian Kurdish forces (also supported by the United States), push many Turkish-backed militants, jihadist and non-jihadist, out of northern Syria. Russia's air campaign also helped cut oil smuggling routes to Turkey and, following the downing of the Russian Su-24 fighter jet, established a de facto no-fly zone for Turkey over Syria. Syria's future political arrangement is unlikely to be to Ankara's liking. Still, Erdoğan effectively exploited Russia's intervention in Syria in his domestic struggle for power to mobilize a nationalist wave and reinforce the Islamist-nationalist nexus.

The role of the Syrian Kurds, in particular, is a significant point of disagreement between Turkey and Russia. Turkey sees them as terrorists and insists they be excluded from peace talks. Turkey even started directly bombing Kurdish positions in northern Syria. Much like the United States, Russia supports the Syrian Kurds in their fight against Daesh as well as their role in a political settlement. However, direct Russian support to date has been confined to welcoming an NGO representative office in Moscow (the first outside the region) and providing some small arms and light weapons.

In some ways, the Russia-Turkey rift and Ankara's increasingly erratic behavior on Syria might have paradoxically contributed to the acceleration of the negotiation process, especially in the Russia-US framework. The urgency of the crisis at the Syrian-Turkish border raised the chances of the situation spilling totally out of control and of direct military intervention by Turkey. This helped push the United States to mobilize the full power of its diplomacy and influence to (a) avoid putting NATO on the verge of direct confrontation with Russia over Syria, (b) find a way around the issue of the Syrian Kurds, which Washington continues to support against Ankara's objections, and (c) prevent further major advances by Assad's forces on the ground, especially in and beyond Aleppo (two-thirds of the area is now under the control of government or allied forces). While the United States and NATO have been ready to restrain Turkey's adventurism in Syria within certain limits, Russia has exercised maximum pressure on Damascus to accept a ceasefire (at a stage when its forces are advancing) and shown increased flexibility on the range of groups it qualifies as jihadist. This combination may very well have been critical for achieving the US-Russia ceasefire agreement, endorsed by the UN and the International Syria Support Group.

## Conclusion

The ceasefire [announced](#) by Russia and the United States in February does not yet imply the end of the Russian or U.S.-led coalition campaigns. For one, Russia and the United States agreed that military strikes against Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra would continue after the ceasefire, while the Turkish-backed Ahrar al-Sham in the north and the Saudi-backed Jaish al-Islam in the south have been left aside for the time being (which may be seen as a concession from the Russian side). More importantly, the proximity of Daesh and al-Nusra to the positions of both Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam, as well as to a variety of smaller and more fragmented non-jihadist groups, points to the ceasefire's inherent limits. There will inevitably be collateral damage to surrounding opposition forces from attacks formally directed against Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra; these, in turn, will lead to counter-responses. It is also unlikely that foreign-backed Islamist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam, or at least their most radical elements, will in principle observe the ceasefire.

Even though we need to moderate high expectations for this ceasefire (while being prepared for follow-up ones), its potential positive effects should not be underestimated. These include: (a) solidifying, multiplying, and building upon so-called "local ceasefires" across the country, (b) facilitating humanitarian access to many areas, (c) stopping, at least for the time being, the government forces' systematic shelling of urban areas while hardening its latest military gains, and (d) keeping jihadist forces under international military pressure. All this should improve the setting for continuing peace negotiations on Syria.



## What Russia's Military Operation in Syria Can Tell Us About Advances in its Capabilities

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 424

March 2016

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As Russia begins to wind down its military operation in Syria, it is time to assess what it has taught us about how the Russian military operates. Although relatively small in scale, the operation in Syria has highlighted some major improvements in Russian military capabilities. Compared to the 2008 Georgia War, which was the last time the Russian Air Force operated in a combat environment, the Russian military appears to have made great strides in operational tempo and inter-service integration. The operation has also showcased Russia's recently developed standoff strike capability and demonstrated significant advances in its ability to carry out expeditionary operations.

Russia's initial air campaign in Syria successfully targeted weapons and equipment depots that opposition forces had captured from government forces. After eliminating these targets, Russian air forces began coordinating with Syrian and Iranian ground forces against opposition fighters in the northwestern part of the country, though this part of the operation took time to have an appreciable impact.

### **High Operational Intensity and Improved Inter-Service Coordination**

The operational tempo of Russian air operations in Syria was quite high from the start. In October, an average of 45 sorties per day were carried out by a total of 34 airplanes and 16 helicopters. The pace of the operation also increased over time, rising from approximately 20 sorties per day at the start of the operation to around 60 per day at its initial peak on October 8-9. It then declined, most likely because the easiest and most obvious targets had all been hit and opposition forces adapted to Russian air attacks by ceasing to operate out in the open.

The Russian operation further expanded in November 2015, in the aftermath of the bombing of a Russian civilian airliner in the Sinai and again after Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24 that infringed on Turkish airspace. In mid-November, the Russian

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government announced the addition of 37 Su-34 and Su-27 aircraft, which allowed it to increase the number of daily sorties to 127.

The overall average between the start of the operation on September 30 and the end of December was 60 sorties per day, with a maximum of 189 strikes on December 24. This high operational tempo is especially surprising considering the rash of crashes that Russian military aircraft suffered earlier in 2015. Experts blamed the crashes on Russia's over-used and aging aircraft fleet. While unconfirmed rumors circulated that the operational tempo and harsh desert conditions resulted in maintenance problems for many Russian aircraft, the Russian Air Force's ability to maintain the high frequency of sorties for over three months speaks to a more resilient force than expected.

The operation in Syria has also highlighted advances in integration among the branches of Russia's military. This was one of the goals of military reform undertaken after notable failures were revealed during the war in Georgia. In order to improve inter-service coordination, the Russian military reorganized its regional command structure so that all non-strategic military units in each military district were placed under the direct authority of that district's military commander. In the past, cooperation across services in a particular region had to be coordinated through the service headquarters in Moscow; the new structure allowed this coordination to take place at the regional level. This innovation has had the effect of greatly improving the speed of decisionmaking in regional conflicts.

In November 2014, the Russian Ministry of Defense also established the National Defense Control Center (NDCC), which acts as a major communications hub and advanced data analysis center for the military. The activation of the NDCC has led to more rapid information transfer between the theater of operations and military leaders in Moscow. Information from all types of military assets around the world is collected and analyzed in one location. As a result, the NDCC has reduced the number of steps in military decisionmaking, resulting in increased speed and higher reliability in adjusting military actions to changes in the operating environment.

In addition, Russia's air force has demonstrated an ability to work with both other services and foreign forces. The Russian Navy, for example, provided sealift for the Syria campaign, as well as long-range air defense with the S-300 system, which was situated on the Black Sea Fleet's flagship Slava-class cruiser *Moskva* in the first half of the operation. Having a ship-based, long-range air defense system allowed Russia to provide defense against potential attacks while avoiding tensions with Israel, which would be unhappy if Russia provided such systems to Syrian forces.\* Although Russian ground forces played a relatively limited role in the conflict, they were important for providing area defense for the Russian air base at Hmeymim.

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\* The confrontation with Turkey in the aftermath of the downing of a Russian Su-24 on November 24, 2015, changed the calculus, with Russia deploying an S-400 long-range air defense system to Hmeymim air base in the aftermath of the attack.

More significantly, the Russian air force showed an ability to coordinate its operations with Syrian and Iranian ground forces, which conducted offensives against Syrian opposition positions under Russian air cover. While these offensives were not as effective at regaining territory as Russian leaders might have hoped at the start of the operation, they did eventually succeed in driving anti-government forces out of several key areas and placed the Assad government in a stronger position for potential peace negotiations.

### **Advances in Weaponry**

Russia's operation in Syria tested and highlighted advances in Russian weaponry while revealing the limitations of its new capabilities. For the first time, Russian aircraft used precision-guided munitions (PGMs) in combat. Only about 20 percent of strikes used such modern weaponry, however, while the rest were carried out with older, unguided gravity bombs. According to Russian analysts, the air force achieved better accuracy with its unguided munitions by using modern onboard targeting equipment and by more intensive training of its pilots. As a result, Russian aircraft were [able to hit multiple targets](#) in a single sortie for the first time. The vulnerability of Russian aircraft to enemy attack was reduced by decreasing the amount of time spent in areas vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire from the ground and by the widespread incorporation of technology that allows Russian strike aircraft to fly at night. Finally, the Russian Air Force also used for the first time unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to provide targeting information to strike aircraft and to collect data on the effectiveness of bombing sorties in hitting targets.

At the same time, the Russian military sought to limit the amount of new weapons expended. These munitions are relatively expensive when compared to unguided bombs. Moreover, the air force has limited quantities of PGMs in its arsenal and did not wish to expend them on targets when the use of such weapons is unnecessary.

The land-attack cruise missile (LACM) strikes against Syrian targets, launched in October 2015 from relatively small missile ships in the Caspian Sea, were primarily intended to serve as a demonstration of Russia's capabilities. The attacks were launched from three Buyan M-class corvettes and a Gepard-class frigate and flew over Iranian and Iraqi territory on their way to their targets. They were not necessary for the success of the operation, which could have been carried out perfectly well by Russian aircraft already in Syria. By launching missiles from the Caspian, Russia demonstrated that it could launch strikes from ships well inside Russia's air defense perimeter. The real goal was to show NATO military planners (and neighboring states) that Russia has a new standoff land-attack missile capability that can be difficult to neutralize.

Russia's demonstration of new naval strike capabilities continued in December 2015 when Kalibr LACMs were launched against targets from a recently constructed diesel submarine operating in the Mediterranean Sea. This launch of LACMs from hard-to-track submarines

further highlighted the potential threat posed by Russian naval vessels against Russia's potential opponents. These strikes were closely coordinated with the air force, which sent out a sizeable percentage of its long-range aviation to conduct strikes against the Islamic State. This force included five Tu-160, six Tu-95MS, and 14 Tu-22M3 long-range bombers, which launched Kh-555 and Kh-101 cruise missiles and also dropped gravity bombs on targets in Raqqa. These cruise missiles, with a range of approximately 2000 kilometers, had never been used in combat. While a number of analysts dismissed the tactics used by the long-range aviation as outdated, the goal of the operation was to highlight the combat readiness of the aircraft rather than the kinds of tactics the service would actually use in combat against an adversary that can defend against strikes by strategic aviation.

### **Unexpected Ability to Deploy and Sustain Operations out of Area**

Until last September, most analysts (including myself) argued that Russia was not capable of conducting a military operation away from its immediate neighborhood, as its military lacked the ability to transport significant numbers of personnel or equipment to remote theaters of operations. However, the Russian military was able to transport the necessary equipment and personnel by pressing into service the vast majority of its large transport aircraft and almost all naval transport ships located in the European theater. Furthermore, it reflagged several Turkish commercial cargo vessels as Russian navy ships and pressed them into service to transport equipment to Syria. While Russia remains almost completely dependent on its rail network for military transport, the operation in Syria has shown that it has sufficient sea- and airlift capability to carry out a small operation away from its borders and that it can increase that capacity in innovative ways.

Russia's initial planning for its Syrian operation assumed that it would continue for three to six months. The slow initial progress by Syrian government forces in retaking territory combined with the perception of an increased threat to Russian interests from both ISIS and Turkey, resulted in an expansion of operations. Russia began to use at least two additional Syrian airbases more conveniently located for providing air support for Syrian government offensives in the southern and eastern parts of the country. Each base used by Russian aircraft requires protection, which led to the [deployment of additional artillery batteries](#). Despite an increase in forces, the Russian military has not had problems resupplying its troops and was ready to continue operations in Syria for the indefinite future.

The recent announcement that Russia would begin to withdraw its forces from Syria does not necessarily mean that the operation is ending. In the same announcement, President Vladimir Putin ordered Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu to keep all existing bases in Syria open and operating at present levels. Russian air defense systems and some aircraft are likely to remain in Syria. This will allow for a quick return of Russian forces to Syria if the political and military situation warrants it.

## **Conclusion**

Russia's operation in Syria sought to accomplish multiple goals. Apart from its geopolitical objectives, it was designed to test improvements in Russian military capabilities resulting from military reforms carried out over the last seven years and to highlight these improvements to potential adversaries. Although the Russian operation was initially slow in helping the Syrian government turn the tide against its opponents—and the impact of recent offensives and the subsequent ceasefire remains to be seen—it is clear that these reforms have resulted in a significant increase in Russia's warfighting capability.



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