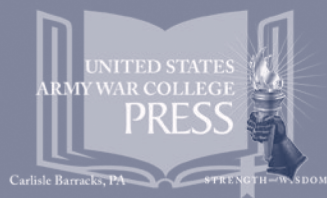


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THE TURNING POINT FOR RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

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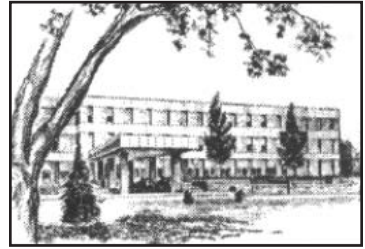


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**THE TURNING POINT FOR RUSSIAN FOREIGN
POLICY**

Keir Giles

May 2017

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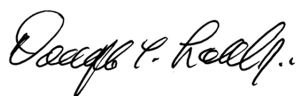
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FOREWORD

Russia's military interventions in Ukraine from 2014, and Syria from 2015, caused widespread surprise among Western policy communities, including in the United States. However, as the British scholar of Russia, Keir Giles, explains in this Letort Paper, these interventions represented the culmination of two well-established trends that had been clearly identified by Russia-watchers over preceding years. These were first, a mounting perception of direct threat against Russia from the West, and second, Russia's own greatly increased capability for military or other action to respond to this perceived threat.

Mr. Giles highlights the specific security preoccupations of Russian leaders over decades, not always perceptible outside Russia, which lead them to entirely different interpretations of current events from those taken for granted in the West. This mismatch of the understanding of the causes and drivers of world developments – and in particular, whether they are part of an overall campaign of hostility against Russia – carries with it the risk of conflict as Russia perceives entirely innocent future actions by the United States or the West as dangerous and destabilizing, and responds accordingly. This Letort Paper concludes with a range of policy recommendations intended specifically to mitigate this risk.

Consequently, the Strategic Studies Institute recommends this analysis of the key drivers of Russian assertive action to policymakers and decision-makers engaged in the relationship both with Russia and with Russia's European neighbors.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr." in a cursive script.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.
Director
Strategic Studies Institute and
U.S. Army War College Press

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KEIR GILES is the Director of the Conflict Studies Research Centre (CSRC), a group of deep subject matter experts on Eurasian security formerly attached to the United Kingdom (UK) Ministry of Defence. Now operating in the private sector, CSRC provides in-depth analysis on a wide range of security issues affecting Russia and its relations with overseas partners.

After beginning his career working with paramilitary aviation in Russia and Ukraine immediately following the fall of the Soviet Union, Mr. Giles joined the BBC Monitoring Service (BBCM) to report on political and military affairs in the former Soviet space. While still working for the BBCM, Mr. Giles also worked for CSRC at the UK Defence Academy where he wrote and briefed for UK and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) government agencies on a wide range of Russian defense and security issues. He is an Associate Fellow of the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) in London, UK, as well as a regular contributor to research projects on Russian security issues in both the UK and Europe. Mr. Giles's work has appeared in a wide range of academic and military publications across Europe and in the United States.

SUMMARY

This Letort Paper examines the background to Russia's use of military force in Ukraine in 2014 and Syria in 2015, and investigates the roots of Russia's new assertiveness and willingness to resort to direct military action to resolve foreign policy challenges.

This Letort Paper identifies two long-standing trends that led to this increased willingness: first, a greater and more urgent perception of threat, whether real or imagined, to Russia's own security; and second, a recognition that Russia itself had regained sufficient strength, military and otherwise, to assert itself and counter this threat.

Viewed through the prism of Russian threat assessment, events of the previous 15 years, including the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, the Arab Spring, Western intervention in Libya, and election protests at home in 2011, had all represented a single trajectory: they gave rise to the perception that the West's habit of fostering and facilitating regime change by means of "color revolutions," indiscriminately and with little regard for the consequences, might have Moscow as its eventual target.

The Munich Security Conference of February 2007 was the first point at which the West, in general, took notice of the mounting dissatisfaction and alarm emanating from Russia at the state of the international order, and with what Russia perceived as unilateral and irresponsible actions by the West led by the United States. However, the themes that Russian President Vladimir Putin elaborated at the conference were familiar from Russian state discourse over previous years, as Russian concern over the new international

order had already been growing rapidly. Instances of foreign intervention from Kosovo onwards had projected to Moscow a clear pattern of the erosion of the notion of state sovereignty as an absolute. This alarming prospect was accentuated by—as Moscow sees it—an increasing tempo of unrestrained and irresponsible interventions by the West with the intention of regime change, leaving chaos and disorder in their wake. The Orange Revolution cemented Russian perceptions that Western-encouraged regime change carried intent hostile to Russia.

Given the role and significance of Ukraine to Russia, Moscow perceived this as a strategic defeat. However, importantly, this perception was insufficiently appreciated in the West—just as 10 years later in 2014, the strength of Russian reaction was not considered as a factor in what were ostensibly internal developments in Ukraine. The key difference in 2014 was that Russia felt empowered to act instead of merely protesting. There is a parallel here with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) enlargement—2004 was also the year when the Baltic States achieved NATO accession. This too provoked a vociferous and strongly negative reaction from Russia; however, with Russia still protesting from a position of relative weakness, this reaction was taken much less seriously than similar sentiments expressed a decade later after clear demonstrations of Russian readiness to intervene to protect its perceived interests.

The fear of instability and “the accumulation of elements of chaos and anarchy in world affairs” are consistently expressed in Russian leadership statements.¹ In this context, many Russian statements are redolent of nostalgia for the stability of a bipolar world, where U.S. and Soviet interests were in balance. Rus-

sian overtures to the United States, and the evident desire to be treated as an equal partner, can be seen as attempts to restore this balance. As stated by President Putin in 2014, “a bipolar system of international relations used to lend stability to those relations. After that bipolarity disappeared, the law of the strong replaced international law.”²

At the beginning of the current decade, the new challenges arising from the Arab Spring confirmed for the Russian security leadership that they had correctly assessed the international situation as one of impending direct threat, based on the view that political instability in North Africa and the Middle East results from the plotting of the West led by the United States. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has commented repeatedly that the negative outcomes of the Arab Spring were a direct result of U.S. policy, and at the height of the Arab Spring, former Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev echoed the view that Russia was vulnerable to the same kind of interference. This view that political change in North Africa after the Arab Spring came about as a result of Western information warfare and cyber-conspiracy, which could now be implemented against Russia, fed into suspicion of foreign orchestration at the time of Russia’s election protests in late 2011 and early 2012—based on the assumption that any alarming social phenomena in Russia must be inspired from overseas.

Thus the prospect of destabilization close to home, once again in Ukraine at the beginning of 2014, would have been of acute and direct concern in Moscow. Even without the accompanying disorder, the threat of the “loss” of Ukraine to the West posed an immediate military problem: it appears to have been considered plausible in Moscow that this constituted an

immediate danger of losing the defense industry in the Donbass and the Black Sea Fleet's base in Sevastopol, together with the often-overlooked supporting infrastructure scattered across the Crimean peninsula, to NATO. According to Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolay Patrushev, the consequences could be even more far-reaching: "Americans are trying to involve the Russian Federation in interstate military conflict, to facilitate the change of power by way of using the events in Ukraine, and ultimately to carve up our country."³

Debate continues as to whether this belief in a Western agenda to destroy Russia is genuinely held or not. However, while important, the question is in a way by this stage purely academic. The conviction of threat from the West is expressed so persistently, at all levels of Russian government and society, that perception equates to reality. This is particularly the case following the isolation of Russian media space after the beginning of the crisis around Ukraine, which means that large sections of the Russian population no longer have access to outside sources of information to counterbalance the Russian state narratives of a nation under siege and an impending hour of national crisis.

Nevertheless, while Russian threat perceptions remain consistent, Russia's capability to address them has changed drastically.

A key difference between Syria and Ukraine, and previous confrontations where Russia did not play such an active role, is that Russia now feels sufficiently powerful by comparison to the West – in military, political, and diplomatic terms – to mount active countermeasures. Adroit manipulation by Russia of the West's confrontation with Syria over the use of chemical weapons in 2013 averted the possibility of

imminent military action, and represented a successful Russian gamble in testing its power and influence by standing up to the West. Western intervention in Syria, after strenuous opposition from Moscow, would have destroyed all Russian political credibility. Instead, by facing down and containing the West, Russia has gained legitimacy in some quarters as the protector of the status quo, sovereignty, and stability and was emboldened by the confirmation that outmaneuvering the West is now possible. This contributed to the confidence with which, a year later, initial actions against Ukraine were undertaken – and subsequently, the seizure of Crimea validated the post-Georgia view that Russian direct military action can also be successful and lead to long-term strategic gain through presenting the world with a *fait accompli*.

Russia continues to present itself as being challenged by an approaching threat and that it must mobilize to confront that threat. Actions taken in response, even if viewed by Moscow as defensive measures, are likely to have severe consequences not only for Russia's neighbors but also for their allies in both Europe and North America. Understanding the Russian perspective of recent history, regardless of whether that perspective is accurate or flawed, is essential for minimizing the risk of conflict that this entails.

ENDNOTES - SUMMARY

1. As, for example, in "Presentation and responses to questions by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on topical issues of foreign policy of the Russian Federation," Moscow, October 20, 2014, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation website, available from mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/B67488BB3E659D-8444257D77004CCED0.

2. "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," Russian presidential website, March 18, 2014, available from *kremlin.ru/news/20603*.

3. "Interview with Security Council Secretary Nikolay Patrushev," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, February 11, 2015.

THE TURNING POINT FOR RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

INTRODUCTION

We surely would be unwise to deprecate Russia today [in 1995] when her military strength is weak. We would be inviting the Russians to rebuild that strength in order to command our respect.¹

Russian assertive action in Ukraine and Syria did not denote a fundamental shift in Russian foreign policy. Moscow's response to developments in Kiev in early 2014 merely accelerated and reinforced trends that were in place long before. Both long-standing aspirations and mounting security concerns have now been acted on by a much more assertive and confident Russia: assertive in defending its interests, and confident in the leverage and power that it enjoys to do so. These new characteristics resulted from the culmination of two important trends in the Russian view of itself and the world. These were, first, a greater and more urgent perception of threat, whether real or imagined, to Russia's own security; and second, a recognition that Russia itself had regained sufficient strength, military and otherwise, to assert itself and counter this threat.

The Russian argument that the United States and the West in general is in inexorable decline is offset by a perception of varying threats from the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the European Union (EU).² Throughout Russian, and then Soviet, and then Russian history, the West has always been seen as a destabilizing force that must be resisted.³ What was new in 2014 and 2015 was a more

direct and immediate sense of this threat, whether imagined or not, and Russia's confidence and ability to actually do something about it.

Viewed through the prism of Russian threat assessment, events of the previous 15 years, including the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, the Arab Spring, Western intervention in Libya, and election protests at home in 2011, all represented a single trajectory. These events affect Russian security in ways that are not always apparent to Western policymakers. One root cause of this is Russian insecurity, leading to a perception that the West's habit of fostering and facilitating regime change by means of "color revolutions," indiscriminately and with little regard for the consequences, may have Moscow as its eventual target. In the meantime, those regime changes that had already taken place created sufficient regional destabilization to cause significant and growing alarm in Russia.

This Letort Paper will seek to explain the Russian reading of these past events, in order to give context for present-day Russian actions.⁴ The difference between Ukraine and Syria, and previous confrontations where Russia did not play such an active role, is that Russia now feels sufficiently powerful by comparison to the West—in military, political, and diplomatic terms—to mount active countermeasures.

PREHISTORY

It is uncontroversial to suggest that the Munich Security conference of February 2007 represented an important point in the evolution of relations between Russia and the West. However, it must be stressed that this is not because of any display of a new vector

in Russian foreign policy. Instead, this was the first point at which the West in general took notice of the mounting dissatisfaction and alarm emanating from Russia at the state of the international order, and with what Russia perceived as unilateral and irresponsible actions by the West led by the United States.

In media representations of the time, this was one of the many iterations of the sudden resurgence of Cold War analogies since 1989.⁵ However, for the Russia-watching community, the extent of international surprise at Russian President Vladimir Putin's comments was unexpected. The themes that Putin elaborated on at the conference were familiar from Russian state discourse over previous years, and the forthrightness with which they were expressed had been gradually mounting over that period. It is likely that the reason why the 2007 speech received such attention by comparison to previous expressions of the same concern was its directness. After all, as President Putin himself said:

This conference's structure allows me to avoid excessive politeness and the need to speak in roundabout, pleasant but empty diplomatic terms. This conference's format will allow me to say what I really think about international security problems.⁶

Putin had been saying, in fact, what he thought for some time; but in the West, if the message was received at all, it was not understood. A wealth of examples is available, but one may be sufficient to demonstrate the point. In 2004, the Russian perception of destabilizing threats sponsored from abroad – highlighted in Munich 3 years later – was already well developed. However, the comments made by Putin at a press conference toward the end of that year, while reflecting

this concern, would not have conveyed it to a foreign audience since the Russian context in which they were framed would be unrecognizable to Western politicians viewing the same processes:

If we are to speak of post-Soviet space, I am most concerned by attempts to resolve political issues by non-legal means. This is the greatest source of danger. The most dangerous activity is to create a system of endless revolutions – rose revolutions; what will they think of next – blue revolutions? We need to get used to living by the law, and not political expediency, as defined in some distant place, on behalf of one people or another. Within society itself, clear rules and procedures have to evolve. Of course, we must also be aware that democracies need to be supported and helped, but if we take the path of endless revolutions, there will be nothing good in it for these countries, and their peoples. We will drown the entire post-Soviet space in a chain of never-ending conflicts, that will have fairly tragic consequences.⁷

Russian security thinking was widely ignored by the West while Russia was weak and could easily be overlooked except as a potential source of dangerous instability itself in the event of state collapse. Viewed from Moscow, the picture was very different. In 1995 – when Russian defense capability was rapidly approaching its nadir – a study commissioned by the Russian Ministry of Defense found that the United States and its allies still represented the main threat to Russian national security, and recommended a return to a nuclear stand-off and reoccupation of the Baltic states to counter “Western attempts to isolate and destroy Russia.” Other recommendations included economic protectionism, a military-nuclear alliance with Iraq, Iran, and Libya, and the creation of a new state including Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine.⁸

Nevertheless, when interviewed shortly after his arrival in power, President Putin stated that, “in many ways Russia has changed the principles of its foreign policy. Russia no longer attempts to impose its will on anybody. We are prepared to take part in international affairs on a broad-based democratic basis.”⁹ In the context of the time, it is not inconceivable that this was a sincere aspiration; but a radical revision of Putin’s assessment of the danger posed by the West to Russia would ensue. All post-Soviet Russian leaders have begun their tenure hoping for close cooperation with the West, then become disillusioned. This applies equally to Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, and Vladimir Putin. The cyclical nature of relations between Russia and the West, where high intentions founder on incompatible strategic priorities and a confrontation ensues, followed by a reset, has considerably greater impact in Moscow than in European and North American capitals with significantly more limited institutional memory.¹⁰

THREAT PERCEPTION

The fear that the West is considering bringing about regime change in Russia does not stand up to objective scrutiny, despite being occasionally encouraged by loose talk from the United States about direct interference in the post-Soviet space in order to counter Russian projects and interests.¹¹ Nevertheless, it appears deep-rooted among a broad sector of the Russian security elite. It has been accentuated in the past decade by, as Moscow sees it, unrestrained and irresponsible interventions by the West with the intention of regime change—the “color revolutions” and the Arab Spring—leaving chaos and disorder in their wake.

One contributory factor commonly underestimated in the West is Russia's self-perception. Russia sees its wealth—defined almost universally in terms of abundant natural resources—as a tempting target for foreign powers to seize. Projection of Russian attitudes onto those foreign powers in a form of mirroring makes it plausible within Russia that the country presents an attractive target for foreign intervention, with aims up to and including regime change, in order to gain control of those same natural resources. As expressed by former Russian envoy to NATO and now Deputy Prime Minister Dmitriy Rogozin:

Russia is an enormous country with a small population, we only have 140m people, it is not many, but it is the largest and richest [sic] country. Therefore we have to bear in mind that we should not have any illusions about our security. We need to be very physically strong and have brute physical force in order to protect our riches, because lots of people are trying to creep towards them.¹²

This provides context for Russia's portrayal of NATO enlargement as a threat. Regardless of NATO's intent, it presents a menace simply by "approaching Russia's borders," a problem augmented by the permanent and persistent belief throughout history that Russia's land borders present a critical vulnerability, and in order to protect itself Russia must exert control far beyond them.¹³ This is also a factor in Russian perception of instability in the Middle East as being a much more immediate and local threat to Russia by comparison with the European view of a relatively distant problem that only affects the homeland through generating uncontrollable flows of illegal immigrants. By Russian geographical standards, as expressed by

one senior Russian general, the Middle East is “*sovsem ryadom*” (“right next door”).

It also sheds light on the deep suspicion and hostility shown toward the persistent efforts by Western nations to foster democratic instincts in Russia and its neighbors, including by means of direct support of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Sanctions and economic pressure, too, take on a more directly threatening aspect in Moscow than may appear from Brussels or Washington, DC. It is asserted that the Western sanctions imposed in 2014 are not only intended to undermine Russia’s economy and administer “punishment” for Crimea, but in fact have the ultimate aim of regime change—even though there is little doubt that uncontrolled regime change in Russia would be directly contrary to Western interests.¹⁴ But according to former Russian Minister of Finance Yegor Gaidar, concerted economic pressure can have devastating results: “The timeline of the collapse of the Soviet Union can be traced to September 13, 1985,” when Saudi Arabia decided to increase oil production in order to abandon price protection.¹⁵ The consequent collapse in oil prices contributed directly to the end of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). In the current context of economic challenges to Russia as a result of a less dramatic, but still impressive, fall in oil prices, this cannot be far from the minds of President Putin and his advisers.

Thus the prospect of destabilization close to home, in Ukraine at the beginning of 2014, would have been of acute and direct concern in Moscow. Even without the accompanying disorder, the threat of the “loss” of Ukraine to the West posed an immediate military problem: it appears to have been considered plausible in Moscow that this constituted an immediate danger

of losing the defense industry in the Donbass and the Black Sea Fleet's base in Sevastopol, together with the often-overlooked supporting infrastructure scattered across the Crimean peninsula, to NATO. According to Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolay Patrushev, the consequences could be even more far-reaching: "Americans are trying to involve the Russian Federation in interstate military conflict, to facilitate the change of power by way of using the events in Ukraine, and ultimately to carve up our country."¹⁶

The fact that it was the prospect of an agreement with the EU, rather than NATO, which triggered events in Ukraine is indicative of the wide range of different challenges that the West in its various forms poses to Moscow. Russia fears EU integration for neighboring states because of the prospect of their systems and economies becoming governed by rules, transparency, and values that are an existential challenge to the Russian system. Russian actions are thus not entirely prompted by unwarranted paranoia; this is an objective threat to the Russian way of doing business, and hence to the incomes of the leadership elites.

In this context, it was not as startling as is widely stated that it was the prospect of an EU Association Agreement for Ukraine, rather than any involvement with NATO, which would eventually lead to military intervention by Russia. As long ago as 2007, even before the Georgian conflict, an EU study highlighted the incompatibility of the EU approach to Ukraine with Russia's stated security interests. It recommended that "as a matter of urgency the EU needs to think over its foreign policies in the Eastern Neighborhood with great care, bearing in mind their impact on relations with Russia, as well as Moscow's possible response."¹⁷ Moreover, in 2011, a closed conference in the United

Kingdom (UK) was told by a senior Russian official that the EU's Eastern partnership program "was a signal to Moscow that the EU had its eyes on the FSU [former Soviet Union] space." In theory, the program was not anti-Russian, in the same way, as a program with Portugal, for example, would not be considered anti-Spanish; but it was undeniably anti-Russian in its claims of spheres of interest. Viewed from Moscow, the distinction was academic. From President Putin's perspective, both NATO and the EU had a very clear agenda – even if it may not always have been clear to the organizations themselves.

Debate continues as to whether this belief in a Western agenda to destroy Russia is genuinely held or not. However, while important, the question is in a way by this stage purely academic. The conviction of threat from the West is expressed so persistently, at all levels of Russian government and society, that perception equates to reality. This is particularly the case following the isolation of Russian media space after the beginning of the crisis around Ukraine, which means that large sections of the Russian population no longer have access to outside sources of information to counterbalance the Russian state narratives of a nation under siege and an impending hour of national crisis. The strident anti-Westernism fostered among the population by over a year of relentless indoctrination carries a momentum of its own, and causes even sober and worldly Russian experts to assess Russia's security in terms of being surrounded by threats on all sides. As put by Ruslan Pukhov, Director of Moscow's Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST) think-tank:

I think that if you are the current Chief of [General] Staff, you should be having nightmares. You can hardly sleep at night when you see your resources have shrunk, that your defense industrial base is not as good as it was at the end of the Soviet Union—the USSR collapsed at the peak of its technological might—and then you have threats all around your borders. It’s not an easy task to prepare a defense for this, and now that we are under a technological embargo from the West it will not be easy to fulfill the 2020 rearmament program.¹⁸

In Moscow at present, only a very brave intelligence analyst who cared little for his career would be putting forward assessments that NATO and the United States do not in fact pose any threat to Russia.

INSTABILITY

An important underlying factor that drives Russian alarm at the prospect of foreign intervention is the assessment that, even if unsuccessful, intervention disrupts stable systems and creates dangerous disorder. The fear of instability and “the accumulation of elements of chaos and anarchy in world affairs” are consistently expressed in Russian leadership statements.¹⁹

Alarm at the prospect of destabilization instigated from abroad is augmented and reinforced by Russia’s collective memory of catastrophic upheaval during the 20th century. The state failures of 1917 and 1991, and recent memories of the political and economic disintegration of the early 1990s contribute to fears of external attacks seeking to compromise the stability of Russia’s sovereignty. According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, the experience of Russia, whose his-

tory has “enough revolutions,” provides a cautionary example because they always involve bloodshed and significant retardation of the country’s development.²⁰ It is argued that this fear of chaos strongly influences President Putin’s attitudes “because for him, just like other Russian politicians of his generation, the central event of his life was the disintegration and collapse of the USSR.”²¹

Putin has referred to revolutions in Russia as “a rupture in history,” which should be disregarded in order to understand Russia’s historical development of the nation. According to Putin’s 2012 presidential address, despite the fact that the upheavals of 1917 and 1991 constituted: “a devastating blow to the nation’s cultural and spiritual code . . . the breakdown of traditions and historical unity, and demoralization of society,” they should be disregarded when considering the history of Russia as an unbroken “thousand-year narrative.”²² President Putin’s characterization of the events of 1991 as a “revolution” often surprises Western observers. However, this is not a new development: as early as 2000, Putin was explaining to foreign journalists that the developments of the 1980s in the USSR were *perestroika* (restructuring), but by the early 1990s, they had transitioned into a revolution.²³ Biographers of Putin are keen to point out that he actually missed the events of that period in Russia, being stationed in East Germany at the time and only returning to a profoundly changed country.

In this context, many Russian statements are redolent of nostalgia for the stability of a bipolar world, where Soviet and U.S. interests were in balance. Russian overtures to the United States, and the evident desire to be treated as an equal partner, can be seen as attempts to restore this balance. As stated by Presi-

dent Putin in 2014, “a bipolar system of international relations used to lend stability to those relations. After that bipolarity disappeared, the law of the strong replaced international law.”²⁴

BEFORE LIBYA

This perception of threat was accentuated by – as Moscow sees it – an increasing tempo of unrestrained and irresponsible interventions by the West with the intention of regime change, leaving chaos and disorder in their wake. Mismanagement of the aftermath of Western invasion of Iraq in 2003 created conditions for the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Western action in Libya in 2011 contributed to replacing a stable regime with an ungovernable space and source of far-reaching instability and weapons proliferation. In the Russian perspective, Western support for anti-government forces in Syria threatened to do the same.

The “color revolutions” terminology lacks a strict definition. However, in Russian usage, it can be broad enough to include the changes of government in Georgia 2003, Ukraine 2004, Kyrgyzstan 2005, and attempts at the same in Uzbekistan 2005, Belarus 2006, and Armenia 2008. Some Russian lists also include the removal of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia in 2000, the “Cedar Revolution” in Lebanon in 2005, and events in Moldova in 2009. This impressive list, in the Russian view, has one common denominator: the illegal (but legitimized with Western support) replacement of unpopular leaders with regimes that were more amenable to the West. Amenable both because of declared commitments to build liberal democratic states

on the Western model, and in the European context through an aspiration for NATO membership and for economic links with the EU as an alternative to cooperation with Russia.

The first of these color revolutions in the post-Soviet space, in Georgia in 2003, already suggested to Russia that the United States was behind a process of seizing that space for its own interests. According to then-Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov:

There are plenty of facts that indicate that everything that took place on those days was not spontaneous; it did not happen overnight. There was preparation, in which the U.S. ambassador actively participated, according to the words of Shevardnadze himself. The preparation was organized through the Soros Foundation.²⁵

The context of the time in relations between the United States and Russia is important. This was not long after the prospect of broad security cooperation between the two countries had emerged following the 9/11 attacks: but even more recently, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq had sowed doubt in Russia as to the strength of this relationship and, in particular, whether Russian views on international security would be taken into account.

Russian alarm at events in Georgia, and concern that they might be repeated elsewhere, was clearly expressed, among others once again by Igor Ivanov:

[Regime change is] not in the interests of the countries of the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] nor of stability in the region, nor international security. I hope that the responsible political forces will not be tempted to push any countries in the CIS onto that path that led to the change of leadership in Georgia.

The responsibility of Western countries is very great here; they must not welcome, as some of them do, what happened in Georgia, and they must assess the events correctly.²⁶

The following year saw the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. Here, Russian perceptions that regime change was precipitated by outside intervention were even stronger. Given the role and significance of Ukraine to Russia, Moscow perceived this as a strategic defeat. But, importantly, this perception was insufficiently appreciated in the West—just as 10 years later in 2014, the strength of Russian reaction was not considered as a factor in what were ostensibly internal developments in Ukraine. The key difference in 2014 was that Russia, 10 years later, felt empowered to act.

There is a parallel here with NATO enlargement. The year 2004 was also when the Baltic States achieved NATO accession. This too provoked a strongly negative reaction from Russia; however, with Russia still protesting from a position of relative weakness, this reaction was taken much less seriously than similar sentiments expressed a decade later after clear demonstrations of Russian readiness to intervene to protect its perceived interests.

Meanwhile, instances of foreign intervention from Kosovo onwards projected to Moscow a clear pattern of the erosion of the notion of state sovereignty as an absolute. This was categorically unacceptable to Russia. The Russian response is visible in a number of domestic policy initiatives beginning with the arrival of Putin in power at the turn of the century. These include not only ideological constructs such as “sovereign democracy,” but also legislation intended to increase domestic control, for example, the contro-

versial laws on foreign funding of NGOs and on regulation of the media. These fit the common objective of an effort to prevent attempts at foreign influence on Russian society and politics. Nevertheless, these concerns persist.²⁷

A secondary effect of the 2003 Iraq invasion and its mismanaged consequences was to reinforce and confirm Russian suspicion of democracy itself in the broad sense, and particularly when “imposed from abroad.” As described by Yevgeny Satanovsky, President of the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies in Moscow, “The development of Iraq after Saddam Hussein’s regime was overthrown cannot be considered a model of democracy; more than this, it is the worst possible advertisement for democracy.”²⁸ Even earlier statements, including by Deputy Foreign Minister Grigoriy Karasin, had drawn a direct equivalence between democratization and destabilization with a subsequent “potential increase in extremism.”²⁹ This too contributes to the more recent campaigns to discredit the Russian liberal opposition in mass consciousness.

Legality is a related concern. The repetitive Russian emphasis on the primacy of international law is mirrored by statements stressing the importance of domestic law and constitutional order, as a prerequisite for stability. According to President Putin speaking in 2005, “My greatest concern personally is not that some kind of tumultuous events are occurring [in a former Soviet republic], but that they go beyond current law and the constitution. We all need to understand and live by that law.”³⁰

Abiding by national laws can be traced as a major theme throughout the Russian responses to many international crises over the subsequent 10 years – up to and including unrest in Syria.

THE ARAB SPRING

The new challenges arising from the Arab Spring confirmed for the Russian security leadership that they had correctly assessed the international situation. Vladimir Putin later stated that Russia's initial reaction to the Arab Spring was positive "because there were expectations of positive democratic changes." Russia's concerns arose later, as a result of the Western response to the uprisings – seen from Moscow as beligerent and interventionist – that Moscow blamed for turning the Arab Spring into an "Islamist Autumn,"³¹ or indeed – as put by President Putin – an Arab Winter.³² At the same time, the rapid expansion of unrest gave rise to concerns that the wave of revolution and instability could spread to Russia's neighborhood and in particular the countries of Central Asia.³³

In late 2013, a delegation from Russia's General Staff Academy visited NATO Defense College in Rome, Italy. A primary theme of the briefings delivered was the negative outcomes of the Arab Spring, and the manner in which the consequences of upheaval in the Middle East and North Africa were far worse than the political situations that the upheavals sought to address. Delegates provided a sobering list of predictions of highly damaging second-order effects, many of which – including confrontation with Islamic State and the spike in the Mediterranean migration crisis – were entirely accurate. Further predictions included an increased likelihood of major war: as a result of not only the rise of political Islam and the uncontrolled spread of Libyan weapons throughout the region, but also through a higher probability of assertive action against Israel and, eventually, the situation "when the Islamists gain enough strength to mount a crusade against Europe."

This provides the context for the heightened perception of direct threat to Russia itself arising from events in an apparently remote region in 2011-13. One distinction that Russian academic analysis draws between the Arab Spring and the color revolutions is that in the Middle East change and popular uprisings were driven by internal social and economic problems; whereas in the post-Soviet states, internal factors played a less significant role than external interference. However, this is in contrast to the argument that is pervasive among Russian defense and security circles that political instability in North Africa and the Middle East results from the plotting of the West led by the United States. Sergey Lavrov has commented repeatedly that the negative outcomes of the Arab Spring were a direct result of U.S. policy, and at the height of the Arab Spring, former Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev echoed the view that Russia was vulnerable to the same kind of interference.³⁴ In a widely quoted comment from February 2011, he said:

Look at the situation that has unfolded in the Middle East and the Arab world. It is extremely bad. There are major difficulties ahead. . . . We need to look the truth in the eyes. This is the kind of scenario that they were preparing for us, and now they will be trying even harder to bring it about.³⁵

LIBYA

A crucial turning point in the Russian attitude to the Arab Spring, and more broadly to Russia's foreign policy as a whole, was Western action in Libya. Despite misgivings, Russia abstained from voting on the United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1773 in March 2011, in what was widely seen at the

time as an unexpectedly helpful restraint from using its veto.³⁶ In doing so, Russia briefly stepped away from its habitual position against interference in internal affairs. This represented a significant shift in the normal Russian approach to international order that must have been preceded by intense discussions within the Russian political establishment. However, subsequent events will have convinced many in Moscow that this move away from the traditional Russian approach was an expensive mistake.³⁷

The generous and elastic interpretation by Western powers of the resolution that Russia had allowed to be passed had a number of serious effects on Russian policy. Any trust in the West's good intentions that remained within Russia was undermined. It was made clear that strict limits must be placed on cooperation with Western powers in order not to prejudice Russian interests. Dmitriy Medvedev, Russian president at the time, was publicly criticized by Putin and subsequently seen within hardline Russian circles as a weaker leader who had attempted to compromise with the West and as a result, unsurprisingly, had been deceived instead.³⁸

This will only have reinforced an already existing deep suspicion of working together with foreigners. Reaching an international agreement through compromise and cooperation, which goes beyond direct self-interest, is not in the spirit of Russian public diplomacy. As explained in 2007, on the front page of Russia's military newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda*, any suggestions that Russia can earn goodwill by making compromises:

are pure deception. Moscow will not earn anything from a policy of concessions. Quite the reverse, any

retreat from our position would show weakness of nerve on the part of Russian diplomacy. *Krasnaya Zvezda* has already quoted the poet Yunna Morits, and it is appropriate to quote her again: 'When Russia makes concessions, she gets her head smashed with a hammer – paid for by countries who want to dismember Russia because they cannot eat her whole.' And this is a truth which is borne out by events from the most recent history.³⁹

Alternatively, as put more succinctly in a saying among British Russia-watchers, "One good turn deserves another. Is not a Russian proverb."

In the Russian perception, Libya represents not only the unconstitutional removal of a legitimate leader, but also a dangerous precedent as a model of revolution for implementation by the West elsewhere.⁴⁰ Following the descent of Libya into dangerous chaos – an entirely predictable development – Russia noted a pattern consistent with the deterioration of the situation in Iraq following the U.S.-led invasion in 2003.⁴¹ Already at this stage, preventing a similar development of events in Syria became an important Russian foreign policy task.

INFORMATION WARFARE

Another important factor that accentuated the perception of threat for the Russian defense and security services was the spread of the Internet. This represented a previously unavailable method by which hostile powers could directly reach Russian citizens – a method that is now visible in Russian information warfare efforts supporting the campaign against Ukraine.

The Russian intelligence services have consistently and publicly stressed the potential for a detrimental

effect on national security arising from connection to the Internet ever since the Internet was available to ordinary Russians.⁴² At a UN disarmament conference in 2008, a Russian Ministry of Defense representative suggested that any time a government promoted ideas on the Internet with the intention of subverting another country's government, including in the name of democratic reform, this would be qualified as "aggression" and an interference in internal affairs.⁴³

It is often not fully appreciated that specific activities that Western powers routinely encourage on the Internet, with intentions largely grounded in human rights rather than security concerns, are interpreted by Russia as hostile actions.⁴⁴ As a result, the perception of vulnerability to "information threats" – hostile activity using the medium of the Internet – has become ever more acute. As argued by Russian military cyber experts in 2012, "this is not an empty scare – the cyberspace warfare is already on."⁴⁵

Once again, Western actions in Libya contributed directly to this heightened perception of threat to Russia. During the uprising and civil war there, social media and online communication circumventing government control played a key role in regime change. According to a study published by the U.S. Naval War College:

Successful dispute of the government control of communications led to freedom of action in the cyber and land domains. This freedom of action led to traditional military support from the U.S. and NATO that ultimately allowed the opposition to achieve the physical objectives of defeating the Gaddafi regime and the eventual election of a new government.⁴⁶

Translated to the context of Russian security concerns, this maps to statements like the one by Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) First Deputy Director Sergei Smirnov in early 2012, “New technologies are used by Western secret services to create and maintain a level of continual tension in society with serious intentions extending even to regime change;”⁴⁷ and by Major-General Aleksey Moshkov of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs in late 2011, “social networks, along with advantages, often bring a potential threat to the foundations of society.”⁴⁸

The view that political change in North Africa after the Arab Spring came about as a result of a Western information warfare and cyber-conspiracy, which could now be implemented against Russia, fed into suspicion of foreign orchestration at the time of Russia’s election protests in late 2011 and early 2012 – based on the assumption that any alarming social phenomena in Russia must be inspired from overseas. During the protests, President Putin said that he was offended at seeing protesters wearing white ribbons that, in his opinion, had been “developed abroad.”⁴⁹ Earlier, while still Prime Minister, he also said that protesters had been “paid to participate” and that color revolutions were “tried and tested schemes for destabilizing a society.”⁵⁰

The notion of the Internet as a dangerous and hostile medium was subsequently vindicated by analyses like the one above of the role of social media in the Libyan civil war – that showed that they can be used not only for the espionage, subversion, and circumvention of communications restrictions suspected by Russia’s security services, but also for other instruments of regime change up to and including supply-targeting information for airstrikes.⁵¹

Russia's response has been visible in a gradual tightening of control over expression on the Internet and, in particular, the increasing isolation of Russian information space from the outside world.⁵² The language President Putin uses when referring to the Internet is indicative; during his 2015 end of year press conference, he referred to the need for information relevant to the investigation of Prosecutor-General Yuriy Chayka found on the Internet to be “*nuzhno ochistit*” (“sanitized”).⁵³ The measures taken to reinforce control over the Internet are in fact the re-establishment of Soviet notions of information security, as exercised by the Committee for State Security (KGB) and its successors.⁵⁴

The primary effect, interpreted in Russian doctrinal terms, is positive: Russia is now less accessible to hostile information activities. However, the secondary effect is to increase the likelihood of misunderstanding and conflict, as the Russian population—and by extension their decision-makers—become increasingly isolated from reality and objective information on which to base their planning and decisions.

EXCLUSION OF RUSSIA

Russia's perception of a West that will stop at nothing to achieve regime change is reinforced by the impression that even when the leader that is scheduled for removal makes concessions to his own population, these concessions are not taken into account and the process continues. In the case of Syria, Russia argued that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had agreed to accept a wide range of initiatives proposed by the international community for settlement of the domestic crisis—including “peace initiatives by the League of

Arab States, the Kofi Annan plan, the UN Observers' Mission and the Geneva Communiqué," as listed by Sergey Lavrov.⁵⁵ In the case of Ukraine, former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich signed an agreement with opposition leaders on February 21, 2014, in the presence of representatives from the EU. In the Russian view, this meant the opposition could have come to power in a legal manner shortly thereafter, because Yanukovich had accepted all their terms.⁵⁶ Instead, according to President Putin, regime change in Ukraine in 2014 took the form of a "coup d'état with the use of force."⁵⁷

Seen from Moscow, the same approach appears to be applied to Russia: active attempts at destabilization in the form of sanctions or support for Russian opposition movements and figures are combined with an unwillingness to seek agreement or even enter into discussions with Russia on subjects of mutual concern. Despite strenuous efforts by the United States to engage with Russian concerns over Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) in Europe, this conversation is persistently presented by Russia as the United States ignoring Moscow's legitimate security concerns and instigating a dangerous destabilization of nuclear balance.⁵⁸ Similarly, Russian proposals for a new European security treaty have been persistently rebuffed, and with good reason, by the Euro-Atlantic community.⁵⁹ This has not prevented Russia from continuing to present the terms of the treaty as a security benefit for Europe: "After the destruction of the Berlin Wall, our Western colleagues missed a historic opportunity, ignoring Russia's proposals to undertake joint development of the architecture of equal and indivisible security in the Euro-Atlantic space."⁶⁰

THE NEAR ABROAD

Like other colonisers, the Russians have had their ups and downs in relations with the 'colonised', but in their own mind the Russians have been the superior people and imposed their own culture on the 'natives'. For these reasons the Baltic Republics, Ukraine, Belarus, the Caucasus and the areas of central and Eastern Siberia are 'ours'.⁶¹

Russia's attitude that it is entitled to domination over its neighbors survives regime change and state collapse—most recently in 1917 and 1991. An assessment of recent history in 1953, examining how Eastern Europe had been lost to Soviet domination, concluded that in the Russian view, "Stalin was no more than reasserting Russian authority over territories which had long recognized Tsarist rule, and which had been torn away from Russia at the time of her revolutionary weakness after the First World War."⁶² Similarly, after 1991, Moscow has continued to act "as if the Soviet Union had not fallen apart, as if it had only been reformatted, but relations between sovereign and vassal have remained as before."⁶³ President Putin's description of the 1991 dissolution of the USSR is informative, "Russia voluntarily—I emphasize—voluntarily and consciously made absolutely historic concessions in **giving up its own territory** [emphasis added]."⁶⁴

The effect of these long-standing assumptions is a mind-set that leads to casual references by Russian generals to *nashi byvshiy strany* (our former countries), statements that even Finland and Poland were "parts of Russia," and that all major powers have a non-threatening *sanitarnaya zona* (cordon sanitaire) around them.⁶⁵ Russia's attempts to maintain, or

reassert, this buffer zone are a major contributor to the current standoff. Moreover, it is plain that at least in some sectors of society, these aspirations by Russia to regain imperial dominion over its surroundings enjoy broad support. The now-celebrated former Prosecutor General of Crimea, Natalya Poklonskaya, in an interview at the time of annexation declared her ambition to “start again in a great state, a great power, an **empire**, like Russia [emphasis added].”⁶⁶ In addition, at the first anniversary rally commemorating the annexation of Crimea, an officially encouraged chant was “Give us Poland and Finland!”⁶⁷

SYRIA – 2013

Expert opinion has offered a wide range of entirely plausible rationales for Russian support of the Syrian government.⁶⁸ However, the Russian position on the conflict in Syria remained entirely consistent since the very beginning of unrest there. Its main principles are that the fate of the nation is to be decided by Syrians themselves; that anti-government interference from abroad is not permissible; and that the path to settlement is an inclusive national dialogue including both the opposition and the current legitimate authorities – in other words, President Assad.

The situation in Syria in 2012-13 represented a further inflection point after Libya. In 2012, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (Russian MFA), along with many others, considered it possible that the Syrian opposition would shortly achieve regime change.⁶⁹ When this did not take place, Russia perceived that the West appeared intent on toppling another regime for their own purposes, with all the damaging and destabilizing consequences that would have entailed.

The fact that former U.S. President Barack Obama had called the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Syria a “red line,” together with persistent messaging indicating a military response, left no-one in Russia doubting that Syria would be attacked in September or October 2013.⁷⁰ However, adroit manipulation by Russia of confrontation with Syria over the use of chemical weapons averted the possibility of imminent military action.

This represented a Russian gamble in testing its power and influence by standing up to the West. Western intervention in Syria, after strenuous opposition from Moscow, would have destroyed all Russian political credibility. Instead, by facing down and containing the West, Russia gained legitimacy in some quarters as the protector of the status quo, sovereignty, and stability. This presented a major diplomatic and geopolitical turning point. It supported the Russian assessment that the United States can be manipulated back from the brink of military action or intervention. The powerful message sent to the regimes around the world that are concerned about confrontation with the West was, “Russia is back and can help save you.”

Furthermore, Russia confirmed for itself that outmaneuvering the West is now possible. This contributed to the confidence with which, a year later, initial actions against Ukraine were undertaken—and subsequently, the seizure of Crimea validated the post-Georgia view that Russian direct military action can also be successful, and can lead to long-term strategic gain through presenting the world with a *fait accompli*.

Success in Syria bolstered Russia’s aspiration toward recognition as a world power which, in terms of influence, is on a par with the United States. This latter point is a significant factor in Russian thinking

regarding the West, which is not always perceived there. Many Russian actions in the last 20 years can be seen as efforts to rebuild the national status as a great power that was lost in 1991. In this context, it needs to be remembered that, in effect, Russia's entire national history is as a world-class power – with the exception of the traumatic last 2 decades. Thus, the question of status and self-perception needs always to be borne in mind when considering Russian foreign policy, especially toward the United States and its closest allies. The insistence that no regional security issue can be addressed without the involvement of Russia reveals the significance of Russian insistence on being treated as an equal.

Some analysts have argued that this great power aspiration constitutes its own ideology, which is now driving Russian expansionist tendencies rather than a desire for greater territory per se. For instance:

Since Vladimir Putin's return to the Russian presidency in March 2012, Russia's foreign policy has been motivated by major ideological concepts rather than traditional geopolitical considerations of territorial expansion. . . . Indeed, Russia's desire to re-establish its great power status has become constant focus of the Kremlin's international behavior.⁷¹

Russia standing as a protector against revolution and Russia standing against the United States, both form the same attraction for third parties. Russia represents itself as a herald of the post liberal order, standing for anti-liberalism and traditional values. This has a particular appeal for the Islamic world.

In any case, Russia's efforts in key international security issues are also linked to the desire to reinforce its status of an independent center of influence on

international security. The rapid intensification of bilateral contacts between Russia and a number of countries of the region—for example: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt—after the Syrian chemical weapons deal suggests that this approach was successful, and countries in the region saw advantage in Russia presenting an alternative to the Western approach led by the United States.

SYRIA – 2015

In 2013, the primary goal of preventing a U.S. military intervention and regime change in Syria was achieved not by military means, but by a mix of assertive and persistent diplomatic efforts and support for the Assad regime with money, weapons, and political protection in the UN. In 2015, Russia felt sufficiently empowered to move to direct military intervention itself, involving power projection of a scale and nature not seen from Moscow for many decades.

From the earliest stages of this intervention, it could already be seen that a number of Russia's secondary objectives were successfully met. Moscow once again showed itself as a reliable partner to other Middle East regimes who had grown uneasy over the depth of Washington's commitment to them, with the added benefit of embarrassing then President Barack Obama.⁷² In other words, when "the region is falling apart, and states are collapsing . . . the Russians are willing to intervene to protect their interests and assert their power, and the United States is not."⁷³ Moreover, crucially, Russian operations in Syria achieved striking success in diverting attention from the situation in Ukraine. This not only benefited Russia, but also played into the hands of those European states

that wish to return to business as usual with Russia as soon as possible, including lifting the sanctions that are damaging their own domestic economies. The Minsk Accords on a notional ceasefire provide a fig leaf; if Russia can be said to be abiding by them, it can be claimed that Moscow is behaving in a civilized manner.

As the deployment to Syria developed, additional secondary benefits for Russia became clear. Air and ground operations, and the substantial logistics effort required to sustain them, were used as a further method of testing and evaluating new force structures, capabilities, and equipment. As explained by Russian Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov, "Today we are acquiring priceless combat experience in Syria. It is essential for this to be analyzed in the branches of service and the combat arms at both the operational and tactical levels."⁷⁴

However, the single most serious implication of Russia's intervention in the Middle East became clear with the conclusion of the cessation of hostilities agreement in March 2016. The terms of this ceasefire achieved a Russian goal that had been consistent since the beginning of the conflict: stopping military operations by opposition forces against the Assad government. It was also a substantial step toward another of Russia's key aims: a negotiated transition of power in Syria, rather than the forcible removal of President Bashar al-Assad previously insisted on by the United States.

In effect, the change in U.S. policy from demanding the removal of Assad toward possibly accepting him as part of a negotiated political transition represented a retreat in the face of Russian military assertiveness. This confirmation that United States policy

can be changed through decisive military action can only embolden Russia to be firmer in pursuit of its objectives in future.⁷⁵

RUSSIA IS BACK

A country which 10 years ago it seemed could be used as a doormat is now demonstrating a political trajectory independent of outside influences, based on dynamic economic growth.⁷⁶

Recent developments have thus heightened the sense of urgency and threat for Russian security planners. Meanwhile, while Russian intentions and security concerns have not changed, Russia's capability to address them has done so drastically. The move to a more assertive foreign policy appears to have begun in earnest after the handover of Russian presidential power from Dmitriy Medvedev to Vladimir Putin in 2012. Putin's perception of an external challenge must surely have been exacerbated by the realization that the great majority of Western politicians and commentators treated his reappearance as bad news. This will have contributed to the steps taken to minimize any possibility of external pressure via the Russian elite, the opposition, or society as a whole. But a key difference between Syria and Ukraine, and previous confrontations where Russia did not play such an active role, is that Russia now feels sufficiently powerful by comparison to the West – in military, political, and diplomatic terms – to mount active countermeasures. Russia is now in a position to exercise a much more assertive foreign policy than in the recent past, thanks to its own relative strength.

From the mid-2000s, Russia benefited from a sudden influx of revenue thanks to higher oil prices and began to review its perception of its own strengths accordingly. One result was an intensification in the pattern of Moscow employing a wide range of coercive tools in attempts – not always successful – to maintain influence and leverage over its Western neighbors.⁷⁷ The stepping up of this program in the middle of the last decade reflected Moscow’s growing self-confidence on the back of the increased oil revenues and, hence, its ability to absorb any negative economic impact from unfriendly actions against its Western neighbors.⁷⁸ High-profile incidents during this stage included gas cut-offs for Ukraine in 2006, the crude socio-cyber offensive against Estonia in May 2007, and ultimately the use of military force against Georgia in 2008. In each case, the results validated this approach for Russia: the Georgian conflict in particular demonstrated the validity of use of armed force as a foreign policy tool bringing swift and effective results, with only limited and temporary economic and reputational costs to bear.

From the earliest stages, the flood of new money was reflected in huge budget increases for the armed forces.⁷⁹ In addition, after the armed conflict with Georgia in 2008, an unprecedented and expensive overhaul and rearmament of Russia’s armed forces began and continues today. The progress of Russia’s military transformation has been extensively reviewed elsewhere and will not be repeated here.⁸⁰ However, an important point to note is that although Russia’s military regeneration program had to wait for the armed conflict in Georgia in order to receive the necessary political impetus to begin, it had been planned long beforehand. This should not be interpreted,

therefore, as a reaction to short-term developments in relations with the West; in fact, its most intensive phase coincided with the short-lived “reset” with the United States.

Nevertheless, Russia under President Putin has shown, in both Syria and Ukraine, that only small and tangential amounts of actual applied military force are needed to accomplish their political goals.

Russia caused widespread surprise with the speed and effectiveness with which it moved large numbers of its land forces to the border with Ukraine. However, the main role of those forces throughout most of 2014-15 was to sit on the border, augmenting and depleting as required, in order to focus the attention of the West—like a hypnotist’s watch—while only small groups of Russian special forces actually conducted warfare inside Ukraine. Yet, President Putin was still accomplishing his goals: undermining the Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko’s government, keeping Ukraine within the Russian sphere of influence, portraying Russia to the domestic audience as a strong power successfully deterring U.S. ambition, and not least, sending a strong message to other states in Russia’s vicinity not to step out of line.

The Ukraine campaign overall is, of course, far more than a military operation. Successful coordination of military movements and action with other measures in the political, economic, and especially information domains, is the result of strenuous efforts by the Putin administration over preceding years to harness other levers of state power to act in a coordinated manner.⁸¹ However, it would be impossible without the threat of actual military force to back up the other measures now classified by NATO in particular as “hybrid threats.”

Russian military transformation remains a work in progress, and further capability improvements are to be expected. This is due both to the long-planned and continuing reform and rearmament program, and to actual combat and tactical experience in and near Ukraine, to which a high proportion of Russia's ground troops have now been exposed to thanks to troop rotations. In effect, in the words of one experienced analyst, the Russian military has benefited from a "rolling live fire exercise" on the Ukrainian border, a luxury far beyond the imagination of Western militaries.

Meanwhile, Russia's air force and air defense systems benefit from intensive practice in Syria, with the added bonus of testing themselves against NATO and Israeli counterparts, and honing the skills of interaction with forward air controllers on the ground.⁸²

The challenges posed to military modernization by Russian economic deterioration and by sanctions, while important, risk being overstated. The fall in standards of living of ordinary Russians while funds are diverted to fueling military regeneration is unlikely to have the same social effect as they would in a developed Western nation, and this decline is offset to a surprising extent by the boost in national pride that results. As described in a Russian editorial in late October 2015:

So if the economic collapse in Russia continues, pride in the army still cannot fully make up for people the absence of conditions for a normal life. But for now – in a situation where the authorities live by tactics and not by strategy, – the army and military mobilization of the nation really look like a national idea, and a panacea for the crisis, and a means of supporting a high rating.⁸³

Russia has a considerable history of exposing its citizens to privation in pursuit of military aims. As noted in 1996, Russia has never “placed the welfare of its people above its pretensions of becoming a Great Power.”⁸⁴

In the meantime, the progress of the campaigns in Crimea, Ukraine, and Syria show that Russia is already willing to make use of those parts of its forces, which have already reached an acceptable level of capability, even as the broad mass of those forces is still under par. Russia’s *Foreign Policy Concept*, in its current version, dates from early 2013 and makes no reference to “color revolutions” or “Arab Spring” either in the list of threats to Russia or in the section on regional priorities. However, when the drafting of a new *Military Doctrine* was announced in 2014, it was specifically intended to reflect “the emergence of new challenges and threats to Russia’s security manifested in the events of the ‘Arab Spring’, in the armed conflict in Syria, and in the situation in and around Ukraine.”⁸⁵

OUTLOOK AND IMPLICATIONS

Fifty years ago, I learnt one rule in the streets of Leningrad: if a fight is unavoidable, you have to hit first.⁸⁶

The crisis around Ukraine has brought Europe closer to recognition that its values and interests are incompatible with those of Russia and that if the West wishes to support Russia’s neighbors in asserting their sovereignty and choosing their own destiny, confrontation with Russia is the inevitable result.⁸⁷ As put by James Sherr:

some of our most cherished policies conflict with Russia’s own sense of right and entitlement. Supporting

the 'freedom of choice' of Russia's neighbours might benefit Europe, but it conflicts with Russia's interests as Russia presently defines them. To a military establishment that equates security with dominance of 'space', the presence of NATO forces 'in the vicinity of Russia's borders' poses a 'military danger' irrespective of our intention.⁸⁸

This also implies recognition that 2014-17 is not an aberration in relations between Russia and the West; rather, it is the previous 25 years of relative quiescence that were the exception to the rule. European nations have now been prompted by events to once more take an interest in their own defense. Nevertheless, while concentrating on countering and forestalling Russia's next unacceptable act of force, they must also be prepared for a sustained period of difficult and expensive tension.⁸⁹ In Russia's neighborhood, the new normal is a return to old ways.

There is a continuing debate among Russia-watching communities in the West as to whether Russia's actions are guided by a grand strategy, or are purely opportunistic and tactical. One factor that is common to both of these assessments is that Russia under President Putin will continue to be proactive and exploit opportunities where they are presented. The West should not precipitate Europe's next crisis by unwittingly presenting a new opportunity through ignorance of the fundamental Russian security perceptions that prompt Moscow to action.

Russia continues to present itself as being challenged by an approaching threat and that it must mobilize to confront that threat. The responses, even if viewed by Moscow as defensive measures, are likely to have severe consequences for Russia's neighbors. At the time of this writing, attention continues to be

focused on the Baltic States as the most likely next victims of Russian assertiveness. However, the delicate balancing act by Belarus should also be watched closely: despite key differences with the situation in Ukraine, there are enough factors in common that Russian hostile action to protect its interests becomes more likely with each step by President Lukashenka toward rapprochement with the West.

The longer the West waits to make it clear that it will resist Russia in terms Russia understands and respects, the harder and the more expensive this will be, and the less chance there is that it will succeed. As noted by William Courtney and Donald Jensen, two top-flight Russia experts with a substantial track record of accurate assessments and predictions, “In responding to Russian thrusts in Ukraine and Syria, the West has relied on economic sanctions or conceded initiative to Moscow. Experience shows that direct measures—ones that target troublesome behavior—are more likely to be effective.”⁹⁰ Instead of the current practice of U.S. and Western leadership figures handing the initiative to Moscow by declaring what they will **not** do in response, past experience shows that more assertive measures will be effective at establishing the boundaries of acceptable behavior for Moscow.

SUMMARY OF POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Russian Armed Forces continue to see their need to prepare to engage in future conflict as a massive, high technology force and that their potential opponent continues to lie in the West.⁹¹

General Issues.

It must be remembered at all times that realism, in the international relations sense, is the guiding philosophy to which President Putin still subscribes, despite other nations having moved on.⁹² Consequently, the temptation to assess the options available to President Putin from the standpoint of what appears rational in the United States must consistently be resisted.

Moscow needs help in not misreading the West. This means that messaging to Russia must be clear and direct, rather than couched in diplomatic niceties. The approach that President Putin adopts when expressing himself clearly provides a model for passing messages back to him in a manner that will be immediately understood.

History is important to Russia, and historical parallels do carry weight and meaning. The “thousand-year narrative” referred to by President Putin may be unrecognizable from abroad: but it needs to be taken into consideration as part of the framework of his decisions.

Bilateral U.S.-Russia Relations.

Cooperation with Russia on specific bilateral issues is possible. However, cooperation in the wrong fields can entail worse consequences than automatically rejecting Russian advances. If cooperation is declined, the reasons for the rebuff need to be communicated – it has to appear that this is not just happening through incompetence or instinctive disdain for Russia.

Any cooperation with Russia needs clarity and very distinct parameters. This is to avoid further disappointment and an emotional reaction.

The Russian narrative is that “nothing serious in the world can happen without us.” If this is not acceptable to U.S. foreign policy in specific instances, then this must be stated clearly.

It is crucial that the last 2 decades of assumptions about Russia as a partner with shared interests must be reversed and the reality of confrontation recognized. This should not lead inevitably to conflict: the lesson of the Cold War is that coexistence is possible, while recognizing the incompatible strategic interests of Moscow and the West.

Practical cooperation with Russia is possible as long as issues are ring fenced. Russia and the United States can be not like-minded, but practically minded. An example is the continuing of Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) negotiations, focusing on implementation. However, President Putin is seen as not being as invested in control of WMD as the previous Soviet leadership.

Defense and Security Issues.

Planning for managing the Russia problem in hard security terms needs to be long-term, rather than treating 2014-17 as a “current crisis.” Russia will continue to present a challenge for the foreseeable future. Restoring Russia’s status as a “great power” is not a recent aspiration, but a consistent one, which Russia now feels capable of realizing through influence on its near abroad, up to and including the use of hard power.

Russia can be expected to continue acting in its current manner for as long as these actions are successful—in other words, unless and until the United States and the West more generally respond in a way

that is seen as meaningful in Moscow. This ought not to mean a purely military response. Other options for countering Russia ought to be available. Nevertheless, the European unity and support for the United States, which would be necessary for other measures, for example economic ones, remains questionable. In the meantime, it is axiomatic – and proven repeatedly over history – that Russia respects strength, and despises compromise and accommodation. This strength must necessarily include military power, present and ready for use, to provide a visible counter to Russia’s own new capabilities.

Implications for the U.S. Army.

The role of the U.S. Army in Europe (USAREUR) is critical in this regard, despite its much-diminished size and the much-extended front line that it is now called upon to defend.

The activities taken under Operation ATLANTIC RESOLVE, funded by the European Reassurance Initiative, are essential and must be continued. It is these measures that provide the most visible deterrence and reassurance for the states to which the United States has treaty commitments.

The scale and nature of USAREUR activities in the front-line states is not sufficient to mount a serious challenge to Russia’s current military capability; but these and the simple presence of U.S. and allied forces in these countries are sufficient that military adventurism will become much more, not less, complex and unpredictable for Moscow to plan and undertake.

Meanwhile, the U.S. and other training teams operating with the Ukrainian army are harvesting essential operational second-hand knowledge of Russia’s

new and restored capabilities. Substantial progress has already been made in internalizing and acting on these lessons, and optimizing skill sets that have not been required in combat in decades.⁹³ However, this must be an ongoing process, in parallel with the continuously developing threat. In addition, knowledge distribution among key allies must be a priority in order to make best use of the enhanced capabilities offered by support and close interaction with both host nations and deployed forces from third countries.

Finally, it is critical that authoritative voices describing U.S. and NATO defensive preparations in Europe as dangerous and provocative be disregarded.⁹⁴ The opposite is the case: the likelihood of Russian military adventurism is in inverse proportion to the size and capability of the military forces present and at suitable readiness to deter it. In Russian thinking, conventional military power deficiencies present a temptation and an invitation; according to President Putin, Russia “must not tempt anyone by our weakness.”⁹⁵ The lesson for the United States is that demonstrable readiness to defend itself and its allies is a fundamental requirement for avoiding conflict.

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APPENDIX I: THE MUSCOVITE MINDSET

The text below outlines some guiding principles of the Russian approach to the world. It is included here because it provides a thorough, yet succinct, guide to those features of the Russian worldview that are exotic to Euro-Atlantic thought and, therefore, make understanding Russian behaviors highly challenging. As such, it provides background for many of the Russian perceptions of the world outside described in this paper.

This is the first time this text has appeared in a formal publication. It is lightly adapted from a post by “Condottiere” on the United Kingdom’s (UK) Army Rumour Service (ARRSE) website and reproduced here with his permission.⁹⁶

THE “MUSCOVITE MINDSET” IS CONDITIONED BY ABOUT EIGHT CENTURIES OF TOTALITARIAN RULE AND AUTOCRATIC DESPOTISM.

(I need to clarify here that I use the term “Muscovite” to denote the ruling class, and its ignorant though loyal serfs, of what is now generally known as Russia. In actual fact there used to be many “Russias” or Russian princedoms which were all consumed by Muscovy. It is indicative that when the Prince of Muscovy was proclaimed a Tsar (Emperor), he was proclaimed Tsar of all the “Russias” (whether they liked it or not) and claimed Moscow as the inheritor of and successor to Rome and Constantinople—thus self-assuming a leadership role for European civilization and an ambition for world power).

A short and not exclusive summary of the “Muscovite Mindset.”

1. For a Muscovite, it is inconceivable that state power is not concentrated at the apex of the pyramid. In Muscovy, this is at the Kremlin and usually rests in one man or a small cabal. No important decision can be made by any other organ. A Muscovite genuinely believes that all political and economic power in the West is ultimately controlled from Washington—just as Moscow strives to control all political and economic power in as large an area as it can, so does Washington. Multiple power centers cannot be allowed to exist within a political entity as this undermines the power of the center.
2. A Muscovite sees world affairs as a giant “zero-sum game” with the strings being pulled by the major power centers. For a Muscovite, the “Main Adversary” remains the United States of America (USA). So anything which a Muscovite perceives as detrimental to Muscovy is advantageous to the USA. An independent Ukraine is detrimental to Muscovy, therefore the USA must be causing the independence movement there. For a Muscovite, independent non-governmental organizations (NGOs) undermine the power of the State, therefore they must be operating under the aegis of Washington. Any citizen of Russia that protests against the Kremlin is perceived by a Muscovite to be weakening the State, therefore they are being supported by Washington and can be considered traitors.

3. The concept of “Rule of Law” is totally alien to a Muscovite. A Muscovite firmly believes that “the law” is just a tool to serve the ruler in order to make the State strong. It is for the ruler to make the law and to apply it or change it as required.
4. The concept of “Separation of Powers” is totally alien to a Muscovite. The “Executive” is the only Power. The “Legislative” and the “Judicial” are mere (often cosmetic) appendages to facilitate the rule of the “Executive”.
5. The concept of “Separation of Church and State” is totally alien to a Muscovite. The Church serves the State and it is inconceivable that the Church can be regarded as a separate power base.
6. The concept of an empowered “Civil Society” is totally alien to a Muscovite. There can be no organizations which are not answerable to the State. The citizen is there to serve the State. The State is not there to serve the citizen, but to use him/her as it sees fit.
7. The concept of a “Free Press” is totally alien to a Muscovite. The media is there to serve the State. The media must reflect the State position. If independent media offer a different point of view, then they are attacking the State and are seen as traitorous. Of course as this is seen as detrimental to the State, it therefore must have the backing of Washington.

8. The Muscovite sees the world from this point of view and naturally assumes that the rest of the world must have a similar viewpoint (for a Muscovite any different viewpoint is obviously unnatural). As Muscovy sees all other political entities as competitors in a “zero-sum game,” therefore they all must view Muscovy in the same way. As Muscovy is therefore constantly under threat, it must defend itself. Attack is the best form of defense, therefore Muscovite aggression is logically defensive in nature and thus Muscovy pursues a “peace-loving” policy (even when invading other countries). There is no contradiction in the “Muscovite mindset.”

9. Muscovy currently feels extremely threatened. Not just from without, but from within. The peoples of “all the Russias” are finally, slowly but surely realizing that there is a truth in the world that is not the “truth” of the Kremlin. That there is another way of organizing a society than that which has been forced upon them by Muscovy for centuries. The countries and nations that had been subjugated to the “Muscovite Yoke” are incrementally breaking away and making it successfully in the modern “free” world. That Ukraine, the seat of the original great principality of Kievan Rus (the legacy of which was stolen and warped by Muscovy) was moving away from Muscovite control, precipitated a crisis. If the so called “Little Russians” can embrace change in the organization of their society - what will stop the so called “Great Russians” from following suit?

10. The “Muscovite Mindset” is also quite racist. This explains the pre-occupation with the West and particularly the USA as the “Main Adversary”; whereas a more logical conclusion would be that the primary threat to Russia, in terms of sovereignty (economic and political) is from China. But the Muscovite tends to look down arrogantly on non-Europeans (conveniently forgetting his own historic tutelage at the hands of the Mongols). However, it is because of this that the “Muscovite mindset” views the Chinese political system as similar to its own and thus not a threat in the way the Western political system is, in its potential to undermine the control of the Kremlin through its (perceived insidious) appeal to the masses.

ENDNOTES - APPENDIX I

1. Condottiere, “Chronicles of War in Ukraine,” discussion in the online forum “The Intelligence Cell,” started by Domovoy on May 9, 2014, Army Rumour Service (ARRSE), March 20, 2015, last edited March 21, 2015, available from www.arrse.co.uk/community/threads/chronicles-of-war-in-ukraine.213582/page-932#post-6344887.

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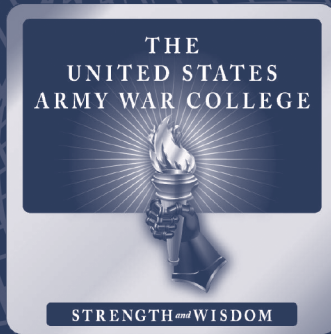
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