



Standoffs at Checkpoint Charlie in 1961, between the United States and East Germany, were precursors to Operation *Long Thrust*, which played a role in deterring the USSR advancement within Germany.

# Russia's Contradictory Relationship with the West

BY PETER ZWACK

## Prelude: Recalling Operation Long Thrust

**O**n August 20, 1961, an American armored battle group of the 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment stationed in West Germany crossed the heavily militarized border at Helmstedt and rolled its way approximately 100 miles along the autobahn across Soviet-controlled East Germany into West Berlin. Too small to be an offensive threat, but formidable enough to be serious, Operation *Long Thrust* skirted the fine line between resolute deterrence and go-to-war provocation, and allowed the United States to avoid becoming militarily embroiled with strident adversaries in East Germany and the Soviet Union.<sup>[1][2]</sup>

That bold demonstration was part of a difficult, and potentially incendiary, period that nearly all experts and observers thought had expired with the end of the Cold War in 1991. As the post-Cold War period unfolded, many thought that a new Russia would, with fits and starts, join the Western community of nations, while the Central and Eastern European lands traditionally caught between Russia and the West would finally find security and maintain peaceful relations with their neighbors.

More than half a century after Operation *Long Thrust*, a modern-day version of this forgotten Cold War deterrence operation reprised itself in Eastern Europe as the United States instituted Operation *Atlantic Resolve*. Russia's illegal invasion and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in March 2014, as well as the continued beleaguerment of eastern Ukraine by Russian-supported proxies, have caused troubling clouds to loom over Eastern Europe, including over Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, three key North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Baltic allies. In response to Russia's actions, the U.S. military in April 2014 sent three modest paratrooper companies from the storied 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade into these geographically vulnerable countries to show allied solidarity and support, as well as to convey an unambiguous message to Russia not to consider any offensive or subversive action against them.<sup>3</sup> In February 2015, Operation *Dragoon Ride*, in

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another determined show of assurance and deterrence, elements of the U.S. Army's 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Regiment and British forces rolled through the three Baltic states all the way to Narva, an Estonian city dominated by ethnic Russians that lies just 90 miles from St. Petersburg.<sup>4</sup> There they celebrated Estonia's Independence Day. While Russian officials fulminated and state-controlled press decried the maneuvers<sup>5</sup>, informed Russian leaders and planners fully understood their intent: while not an offensive threat, they had been served notice that the Baltic States, Poland, and other Eastern European countries were fully under NATO's security umbrella, with all of the protections of collective defense outlined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.<sup>[6][7]</sup>

Another round of multinational exercises by NATO Allied and Partner countries have been underway. In late spring and early summer 2016, U.S. Army Europe orchestrated exercises Swift Response and Saber Strike; during this same period, the annual Anakonda exercises, led by Poland, maneuvered defensively oriented forces across much of Eastern Europe. Other shows of assurance and deterrence, including the brief fly-through of two F-22 Raptor fighter jets into Romania, and exercise Noble Partner in Georgia, an unprecedented deployment in which a small number of U.S. M1 Abrams tanks and M2 Bradley fighting vehicles were sent via ship across the Black Sea from Bulgaria, demonstrate multinational resolve to assure Allies and Partners that external threats will not be tolerated. Among their multiple objectives is to emphasize to Russia the sacrosanct nature of NATO collective defense for all of its allies, especially those nations with Russian minorities that lie in close proximity to Russia's border.<sup>8</sup>

## History and Geography: Why Russia's Continued Rejection of the West?

While the threat from Russia never completely disappeared, it was certainly overshadowed by somewhat improved relations during the post-Cold War period between 1989 and 2014. Recognizing the upswing in relations, how did we come almost full circle to a state of greater tensions and brewing brinkmanship? What is driving Russia to these seemingly aggressive, offensive actions? Or are they actually reactive and defensively preemptive? With very serious demographic, economic, and geographical challenges looming in the next generation throughout its 11-hour time zone expanse, why does Russia persist in its increasingly hard-edged confrontation with the West? One would think that to survive with any real sense of peace, stability, and normalcy, Russia must find a way to positively coexist with the West in the generations ahead. It is my premise that if it cannot, the entire Russian state and society will fail, followed by a dark, unpredictable future for Russia, and, by extension, much of the West.

While in Russia as the U.S. Defense Attaché between the pivotal years of 2012 and 2014, I, along with many other Western diplomats, repeatedly tried to wean our skeptical Russian counterparts from the notion that the West—with NATO and the European Union (EU) as twin cornerstones—was threatening to Russia. We would point out the size of our militaries and the fact that they had been steadily downsizing. We would also emphasize that the U.S. military in Europe had been reduced dramatically since the Cold War and that unless provoked or our Allies were threatened, it posed no military threat to the Russian Federation. Our attention was focused

elsewhere: on the Middle East, Afghanistan, and, increasingly, the Pacific region, which should be of concern to the Russians as well. We also noted that a bordering European Union would be positive, overall, for Russia's economy and standard of living. Finally, we reminded them that other than the Greek and Turkish imbroglio over Cyprus in 1974<sup>9</sup>, all of the countries within NATO have lived in peace, if not always in harmony, throughout the past six decades and that we wished the same for Russia as well.

On occasion, I would ask an informed Russian if Russia would be safe in a world without NATO. Invariably, the individual would lurch forward and answer with an absolute "yes." The more thoughtful individuals would then stop and become pensive, likely wondering what pacts, blocs, and alliances would emerge after NATO and whether they would necessarily have Russia's better interests in mind. Meanwhile, Russia continues to cogitate, and agitate, almost exclusively with a Western primary threat orientation that includes the Black Sea and the Caucasus region. Militant Islam also absorbs them, but it is the Western threat that takes primacy. They rail ceaselessly against NATO's expansion and the perceived U.S. role, along with the EU, as agents of "color revolution" (such as the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, which was partially blamed on "agents" of the U.S. and the EU) and regime change.

Much of this is psychological and visceral, and it is hard to understand from a purely analytical calculus. To attempt to understand Russia—and no one fully can who does not live in their skin—one must pull out a map and re-examine it from a Russian perspective, with an emphasis on its history and geography. If ever there was a large nation driven by

these fundamental factors, it is Russia. History and geography are the key factors that continue to drive Russia's blinkered worldview of multiple existential threats—both real and perceived. It is a worldview that is impressed upon both its domestic populations in nearly every venue since kindergarten, as well as ethnic Russian populations in neighboring countries. It is this world that I shall attempt to delve into and that may unlock a piece of the riddle of why Russia remains seemingly so self-destructive and Western-phobic.

### History, Geography—and Psychology

Russia's geography is primarily terrestrial, without significant warm water access to large bodies of water or strategic waterways. This factor drove some of its earliest Czarist-era and Soviet expansionist behaviors. The melting Arctic ice, with the gradual opening of the Northern Sea Route, was not part of this earlier calculus. Ever since the Mongols erupted out of Asia in the 1200s and overran much of the west, including slaughtering and enslaving medieval Rus, the site of present-day Kyiv, the Russians have been in an existential, land-centric wedge beset by threats from every quarter. This was brought about, in part, by its own expansion that, by the late 1500s, had tenuously connected Moscow to the site of present-day Vladivostok, some 5,000 miles away, and that by the mid-1800s had absorbed, by conquest and annexation, much of the Far East, Central Asia, and the Caucasus.<sup>10</sup> Other fronts included constant struggles with Western states, including Sweden, Poland, France, and Livonia (a historic region on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea), culminating in Napoleon's disastrous march on Russia in 1812. This was followed by confrontations with the British, French, Ottomans, and others in the Crimean

War (1853-1856); the Allied intervention in 1919 during the Russian Civil War (which included the United States); and the ferocious invasion by Nazi Germany in 1941.

As the “Great Patriotic War,” as World War II was called by the Soviets, fades into history for much of the Western world, in Russia it is still a recent memory. Major celebrations and commemorations are held annually on Victory in Europe (VE) Day, May 9, and extensive efforts are made to keep this defining struggle and sacrifice alive in schools and in the collective memory of the general public. The enduring impact of the war was impressed upon me near Smolensk in early 2014 when, while trying to explain why the West and NATO were no threat to Russia, an elderly woman tugged at my sleeve, exclaiming (paraphrasing), “But, General, remember that in my lifetime and that of my parents and grandparents, the Nazis came from the West and stood with their

jackboots on the throats of our villages and towns in western Russia and millions of us died.” Completely disarmed, all I could do was sincerely tell the skeptical *babushka* that today’s West was different and desired a peaceful relationship with Russia. Upon reflection, however, her point was telling, visceral, and evocative. During World War II, a staggering 20–26 million Soviets, many of them civilians, died fighting a brutal war against an unmerciful foe from the West that, if victorious, would have enslaved those who survived the carnage of the invasion.<sup>11</sup> Absorbing the Nazi onslaught, surviving, and then overcoming this frightening existential foe was the single greatest achievement of the USSR; it is still a critical—and painful—part of the living memory of Russia today. While the USSR’s allies—the United States, Great Britain, China, France, Canada, Poland, and other nations—paid a bloody butcher’s bill against Germany and Japan, it



May 2015: Russians gather in Moscow to celebrate Victory Day, the end of World War II.

was the Soviets who endured Nazi Germany's main effort: a massive invasion by a Western power executing a war of annihilation.

Before looking at post-Cold War drivers in order to malign Russian impulses and behaviors regarding the West, we must also recall the deep scars on the Russian soul, many of them self-inflicted, throughout its long history. Between 1914 and 1954, a mere 40 years, approximately 35-40 million Russians (the exact number will never be known) died as the result of two catastrophic world wars, a monarchy-collapsing national revolution, a brutal civil war, a man-made famine, grisly repression, show-trial purges, and a gulag system that turned the nation inside out. What goes on in the psyche of a nation's people after enduring such unimaginable hardship and loss? With the Russian Orthodox Church extinguished, what faith or belief system did Russians turn to during those officially soulless years when churches and cathedrals, temples and mosques, if not destroyed, became stables and were labeled houses of atheism? How does this period of wrenching personal and national violence and loss color the worldview of a people so affected by the loss of loved ones to war, famine, or repression within the last century? No wonder that the Russians are suspicious, defensive, reactive, xenophobic, and often paranoid. All of this makes up part of the tough root structure that characterizes both the durability and the hardness of the Russian persona. It also helps to explain an innate willingness to endure both external and, up to an extraordinary point, internal travail; however, when that willingness snaps, as it did during the bloody revolution in 1917 and as the Soviet Union began to disintegrate in the late 1980s, it can become viciously brittle.

### **The West should be Russia's Life Raft, So Why Its Continued Rejection?**

Despite the rocky relationship that currently exists, it would seem that the one grand region with which the Russians would—and could—attain a stable concordat would be the West. On the surface, at least, the West should be the most “like-minded” with Russia in cultural terms. Today, despite its at times petulant “rejection” of the West for some vague philosophy of “Eurasianess,” Russia is overwhelming Western and Christian, albeit of a distinctly Russian flavor. Roughly 80 percent of Russia's approximately 145 million citizens live between Ekaterinaburg in the Urals, the geographical dividing line between west and east, and St. Petersburg on the Baltic Sea. Russian culture, whether it be the distinct, but Christian, Russian Orthodox Church, its Slavic language, its Cyrillic alphabet, or its fine arts (including extraordinary classical music and world-renowned authors and artists) is of a distinctly Western flavor. Even in the vulnerably under-populated Far East and Siberia, “great Russian” culture, including architecture, although influenced by Asia and Central Asia, is more Western than anything else. This cultural aspect of Russia—truly the world's Eurasian nation—is important to reflect upon while trying to parse out its recidivist and seemingly self-destructive behaviors toward the West. It is also a strong indicator that Russia's fate and identity are inextricably tied to Europe, the U.S., and the West overall. This becomes especially salient when we collectively look to a future that very likely will include competition for and conflict over Russia's abundant natural resources, which go beyond simply oil and natural gas.

Russia's intransigence and reactive intimidation have helped set in motion within the West the very influences and potential threats it purports to rail against, including a complete Western review of its security posture and perspective in regard to Russia. Russia's undermining of core European institutions that stress regional economic and security cohesion and stability, including the EU and NATO, is short-sighted and potentially dangerous, not only for Europe, but for Russia itself. Russian provocations since the Maidan protests in February 2014, which are redefining the post-Cold War legal and social order, have fueled already noxious radical-right sentiments inside Europe. This could not only be divisive for Europe in the short-term, but, as history has repeatedly proven, could turn very dangerous for Russia in the long-term.<sup>12</sup> A failed EU and NATO would ultimately be catastrophic for Russia, a nation that is hemmed in between a vassal-like, transactional relationship in the Far East and an increasingly seething southern flank that includes Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and a vulnerable Central Asia and Caucasus that is susceptible to major Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, as well as Sunni extremist violence. With its own actions, Russia is stabbing at the proverbial life raft it will need in the next generation: namely a stable, non-reactionary, and democratic Europe.

### **Tangled Legacies of the Early post-Cold War Period**

The historical residue and baggage of the Cold War, and the struggle of two competing belief systems represented by the North Atlantic Treaty and the Warsaw Pact, still greatly influence today's attitudes and behaviors. During the Cold War, NATO was seen by the Soviets as threat incarnate, a view stoked by state media

that persists among many Russians to this day. The entire population of the Soviet Union, comprised of 15 culturally diverse republics, was psychologically and materially immersed in a state of constant confrontation with the West while at the same time balancing a different, but longstanding, threat in the Far East. While this essay focuses on Russia's relationship with the West, it is important to note that the Soviet Union and China did have major ideological differences that culminated in border clashes in 1969 over islands within the Ussuri River—a dispute that was not resolved until 2005.<sup>13</sup> Still, despite their announced "strategic partnership,"<sup>14</sup> much of the far eastern portion of the 2,700-mile Russia-China border will always be considered an area of deep concern for the Russians, who are fully aware—as are the Chinese—that they forcefully annexed these under-populated and resource-rich lands from the weak Qing Dynasty in the mid-1850s.<sup>15</sup>

Following the fracturing of the Soviet Union in 1991, the West collectively lost the moment and the opportunity to bring a reborn, initially hopeful, and mostly receptive Russia into the more law-abiding mainstream global order. The failures of the 1990s are well-documented, with plenty of blame all around. Russia increasingly charted its own independent path as a liberal democracy, and market principles floundered in unregulated, oligarchic lawlessness. American and Western triumphalism about "winning" the Cold War—with monikers such as "Upper Volta with Nuclear Weapons" affixed to the struggling Russian state—did not help. This offended the already wounded nation immensely.<sup>16</sup> Imagine a proud Russian waking up the day after Christmas in 1991 to find the country truncated, with approximately half of its

population and close to one-third of its landmass split into 15 separate republics. Furthermore, approximately 25 million ethnic Russians suddenly found themselves living in numerous different countries, such as Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Estonia, and Latvia, thereby seeding the ground for future irredentism and strife.<sup>[17][18]</sup> Throughout this restless, but initially very hopeful period, the Russians increasingly struggled with the furies that emoted after the Soviet Union's fall. These include the psychological and social fallout from its financial collapse, and its failure to secure a victory in the gruesome 1994-1996 Chechen War, which was followed by its bloody pacification in 2000. These presaged and fed a growing militant anti-Russian Sunni extremism that will likely increasingly plague Russia as its demographics change. Additionally, murderous transnational groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant have targeted Russia for its intervention in Syria, while the Caucasus Emirate continues its slow-boil insurgency in Dagestan.<sup>[19][20]</sup>

### Why Russia's Obsession with NATO?

I have always supported NATO, both as a defensive military alliance and as a mechanism to reassure its current and potential future members that there is a safer world within which to coexist than the geostrategic "law of the jungle" that for centuries so marked Europe. It would have been catastrophic for Europe, and ultimately for Russia as well, if NATO had been annulled after the breakup of the Warsaw Pact as the Russians had wished. Untethered nations anxious about security or desirous of settling old irredentist claims could have broken into new pacts and groupings, ultimately presenting grave threats to both European stability and the new Russia. Such

developments would likely have encouraged an earlier emergence of both European and Russian revanchism that could have ended badly for all.

It was right for the newly freed Eastern European nations, including those abutting Russia, to aspire to and gain NATO membership once the required democratic preconditions and reforms were met. Having served for three years in a Joint Staff NATO policy position in the late 1990s, I also definitively know that major efforts were made to keep Russia informed about the momentum toward its enlargement. I watched closely as inclusive mechanisms such as the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act and the resultant NATO-Russia Joint Permanent Council—a precursor to the 2002 NATO-Russia Council—were formed.<sup>[21][22]</sup>

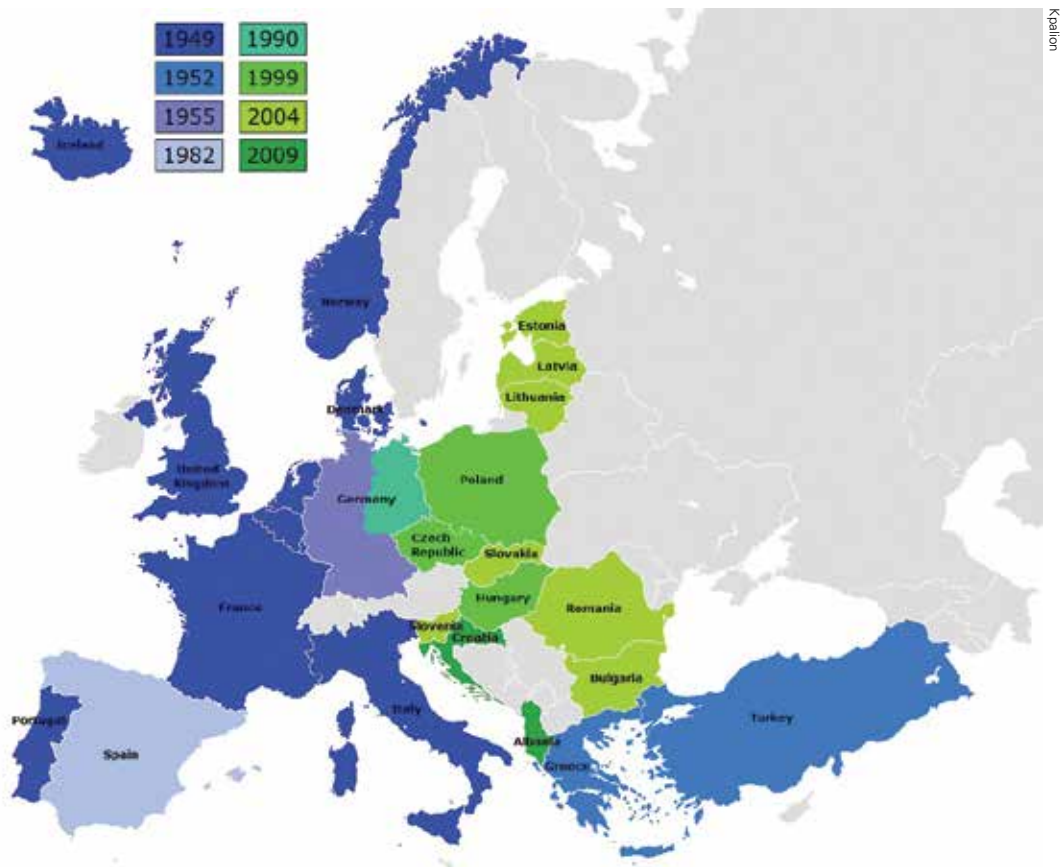
It would be shortsighted, however, not to look closely at Russian perceptions of NATO, the EU, and the West in general. If one considers Russia's penchant both for seeing the world along Westphalian lines and for believing that it is perpetually surrounded by existential threats—whether real or perceived—it is not *visually* difficult to understand their perspective. Untempered by context, between 1990 and 2004 NATO's blue lines advanced inexorably in three successive tranches, over the lands of former Warsaw Pact members, deep into Eastern Europe and the three Baltic States up to Russia's borders. To frame this territorially, in 1989, with its Warsaw Pact buffer zone extended to the East-West German border, the USSR's second city, Leningrad, stood over 800 miles away by land from NATO territory, excepting Norway and Turkey. In 2004, when Estonia entered NATO, the alliance's eastern European land boundary at Narva now stood only 90 miles from renamed St. Petersburg. As seen on the map below, the moving of NATO



boundaries east, the exercising of military forces within them, and construction of rogue nation missile defense centers play to both perceived and contrived Russian fears of NATO encirclement.

It will take firm, measured, and patiently explained actions to ultimately convince the Russians that NATO, unless provoked, is not a threat and that it does not want confrontation with Russia. This, however, will be very challenging. First, there will be senior members in Putin’s regime who will reflexively reject any peaceful description of NATO for their own contrived and craven reasons. This could be seen in their overreaction to the likely prospect

of NATO membership for tiny Montenegro, which shares no border with Russia, and in their recent attempts to intimidate peaceful, neutral Sweden and Finland concerning their internal political discussions about the possibility of NATO membership. No matter what was or was not actually said in the Reagan-Gorbachev, Bush-Gorbachev, and Baker-Primakov negotiations concerning Germany’s reunification, the Warsaw Pact, and NATO enlargement, most Russians fervently believe that the West reneged on an unwritten agreement that NATO would not include a reunified Germany and that it would not expand eastward.<sup>[23][24]</sup> Most of the population, fed by



Map depicting NATO’s eastern expansion over time (1949-2009).

continual state-controlled media disinformation amplifying such notions, ardently believes this and feels the West, with NATO at its forefront, broke faith and expanded eastward, despite protestations by a still-weak Russia.<sup>[25]</sup> <sup>[26]</sup> This point is regularly and pointedly used as a bludgeon-like talking point by Russian negotiators and interlocutors, and continues to taint our relationship today, no matter how hard we try to explain and reassure. Putin himself summarized this view, stating:

*NATO was built to counteract the Soviet Union in its day and time. At this point there is no threat coming from the Soviet Union, because there is no Soviet Union anymore. And where there was the Soviet Union once, there is now a number of countries, among them the new and democratic Russia.*<sup>27</sup>

Added to the mainstream Russian sense of grievance was NATO's decision in late 1998, outside of the veto-constrained United Nations Security Council, to take military action against Serbia and to intervene militarily in Kosovo in order to avert the ethnic cleansing and genocide being perpetrated against the Albanian majority there. While a righteous action, I cannot overemphasize how incensed the Russians were by this as it involved attacks against Slavs, also members of the Orthodox Church and with whom they had always had a patron's relationship. This ended a period of cooperation with Russia that had reached its zenith in Bosnia in 1995 when Russian airborne troops served within U.S.-NATO formations.<sup>28</sup> While Russian forces did join NATO's Kosovo Force from 1999-2003, the relationship was already ebbing quickly. It was also during this period that Vladimir Putin, then the chief of the KGB, was

stretching his wings, beginning his first round as Russia's president in 2000 and executing a brutal campaign to crush Chechnya's resistance shortly thereafter.<sup>29</sup>

Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, there was a brief flicker of potential understanding between the United States and Russia as Russia experienced its own terrorist-inflicted national tragedies, first with the siege of the Nordost Theater in Moscow in October 2002<sup>30</sup>, and then the Beslan school massacre in September 2004.<sup>31</sup> Despite this, however, the U.S.-European and Russian relationship inexorably trended downward. Especially threatening to Russia's power elite were the so-called "color revolutions," epitomized by Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003 and Ukraine's first Orange Revolution in 2004, that apparently were more existential to core Russian regime interests than may have appeared. Most contemporary Russians, once again inflamed by the press and by the pronouncements of their leaders, believe the U.S. and the West were behind these popular demonstrations. In 2008, Georgia, perhaps not fully understanding Russia's antipathy, overreached while responding to provocations, resulting in the Russian invasion and occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The incursion certainly signaled increased Russian assertiveness in areas of the former Soviet Union—Russia's declared "privileged sphere"—in which sizeable Russian minority populations reside.

### **Erosion of Strategic Stability<sup>32</sup>**

The world was very lucky to survive the Cold War nuclear competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. Traditionally, nations that build lethal weapons of strategic scope eventually use them. While the surreal

days of “duck and cover” gave way later in the Cold War to a sustained effort to limit nuclear arms and reduce the threat implicit in the doctrine of mutual assured destruction, we have now entered a period of growing nuclear tension with Russia. It seems clear that for the current generation of Kremlin leaders, nuclear weapons have broad political and military utility; they are a potent means to intimidate and coerce in peacetime and crisis, and play an important role in Russia’s approach to contemporary conflict. The manifestations are plain:

- persistent pattern of nuclear saber rattling and open or thinly veiled nuclear threats that seek to induce fear, caution and, ultimately, paralysis among governments that would have to contemplate whether and how to counter Russian aggression;
- military doctrine that envisions the possibility of initiating the use of nuclear weapons in order to “de-escalate” a regional conventional war;<sup>33</sup>
- violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and a more general refusal to engage on the question of additional nuclear arms control (that is, beyond the New START agreement) and threat reduction (that is, beyond the Nunn-Lugar program);
- continued investment in modernized nuclear forces of all ranges and types.

The risks to strategic stability are equally evident. Adding to concern is the atrophying state of the arms-control regime assiduously built over decades during the heart of the Cold War by legions of hard-working and often disagreeing diplomats, scientists, and bureaucrats. The Conventional Forces-Europe agreement is suspended,<sup>[34][35]</sup> the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program is gone,<sup>36</sup> and the

Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF)<sup>37</sup> and New Start treaties—the latter signed only in 2010<sup>[38][39]</sup>—are on life support.<sup>40</sup> The severe erosion of these substantive, confidence-building measures, which had involved diplomats, bureaucrats, and scientists in near daily dialogue, is yet another layer of de-pressurizing points of contact gone, and bodes ill for the future.

Risk-taking behavior by Moscow could lead to a nuclear crisis and miscalculation or unintended escalation. Russia’s deliberate escalation to the nuclear level in a regional conflict could also trigger a series of nuclear exchanges well beyond Moscow’s ability to predict or control. The danger is that Putin and his circle may well believe they can avoid or control such risks and operate safely under a “nuclear shadow.” This belief seems central to the way Moscow would seek to achieve a rapid *fait accompli* against a NATO member and then essentially engage in nuclear blackmail to deter a meaningful collective defense response from the Alliance. Should this attempt at blackmail fail, Russia seems prepared to consider the actual use of non-strategic nuclear weapons to achieve its objectives rather than wage war against NATO forces that, when fully mobilized, would bring superior combat power to the fight. Such actions are those of an insecure nation with major regional aspirations that also realizes it is out-gunned and out-numbered conventionally.

The dangers of Russian nuclear coercion are quite real to those European states most exposed to them. Moscow’s aggression has renewed fears that Europe once again could become a battleground in a conflict that carries no small risk of nuclear use. As a result, NATO today finds itself engaged in serious discussions about how to leverage its own

conventional and nuclear forces to deter Russia and deny it the ability to gain advantage from a strategy of nuclear coercion and escalation control. The task of credibly deterring Moscow requires the West not only to shed outdated assumptions and mindsets about Russia that are premised on a vision of partnership that is no longer realistic, but also to reconstitute its ability to understand Russia as a political and military rival—as well as a potential adversary in war.

### Ukraine 2014: Post-Cold War Order Unhinged

The year 2014 will go down in history as a turning-point year, similar to 1914 and 1938, because it was during this year that European and global history swerved onto a very dangerous—but avertable—path. The bloody Maidan demonstrations in Kyiv that were followed by the flight of ousted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to Russia dramatically upended Europe's post-Cold War journey toward regional inclusiveness and stability. The West, in its laudatory desire to enlarge the seemingly innocuous European Union, misread just how sensitive the Russians were not just to the prospect of military enlargement, but also to the expansion east of Western free-market ideals and philosophies. With the memory of thousands of Muscovites thronging the streets to protest the 2011-12 presidential secession still extant<sup>41</sup>, it became clearer what the Putin regime saw as its top existential threat: a mainstream popular movement supported by the West that challenged the false legitimacy of his corrupt pseudo-democratic, autocratic kleptocracy. Chastened by the sight of Yanukovich's fall from power during the Sochi Olympics, and the subsequent revelation of the extreme wealth he and his family had pilfered from the

Ukrainian body-politic, the Russian President and his inner cabal likely saw themselves in the proverbial mirror and moved quickly to counter this most dangerous of perceived existential threats facing them.

Teetering Ukraine played to Russia's most elemental fears—and its opportunism. Their worst nightmare was a heavily populated and resurgent Ukraine ascending first to the EU and then to NATO, putting the alliance on Russia's doorstep. Although the plans for its invasion and illegal annexation of Ukraine's Crimea likely had been sketched for some time, hard-core Russian planning probably began in earnest during the Maidan protests and the Sochi Olympics in 2012. The disinformation machine went into high gear to prepare the domestic population for aggressive Russian action, proclaiming that NATO had designs on the heavily ethnic-Russian Crimea, including Sevastopol, the leased headquarters of its Black Sea Fleet. The messaging campaign was bolstered by a series of heroic documentaries and films about the World War II "hero cities" of Sevastopol and Odessa that were played heavily on Russia's "*Kultura*" channel and multiple other venues during this time.<sup>42</sup>

After this dramatically successful shadow campaign that reintroduced "non-linear warfare" and "hybrid warfare" into the mainstream military lexicon—and led to Crimea's illegal annexation on March 18, 2014—Russia turned its attention to the already smoldering situation in eastern Ukraine.<sup>43</sup> After its initial success, which was followed by forays by Russian-backed proxy separatists to seize key government and population centers, including Kharkiv, Mariopol, and Odessa, eastern Ukraine became an increasingly fierce battleground. Modern-day mainstream Ukrainian patriotism—manifested by the fierce resistance

of its slapped together, hodge-podge military and volunteers—was born in battle, much to Russia’s chagrin.

This drama in Ukraine played out as a subset of a greater European-U.S. struggle of ideals and actions with Russia. While the EU may have misjudged that association with Ukraine would be seen as an actionable threat to Russia, it managed to pull together and levy what has proven to be an effective sanctions regimen, despite the economic hardship it brought to some of its members. Russian membership in the G8 was suspended and NATO—increasingly concerned by Russia’s Western-oriented revanchism, with former Soviet states containing significant numbers of Russian minorities its likely target—was stirred to action.

If the illegal annexation of Crimea had not already coalesced EU unity, the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 on July 17, 2014 certainly did. It was at that moment that the general trend of Russian successes that had begun with the Sochi Olympics, the takeover of Crimea, and its support for pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine came to a screeching halt. Rather than take the diplomatic high ground that many hoped it would, Russia instead tried to deceive and obfuscate its way out of the strong likelihood that a Russian-supplied Buk missile shot down the defenseless civilian jetliner, resulting in the deaths of all 298 innocent civilians on board.<sup>44</sup> This tragedy was a major turning point for European attitudes; more importantly, however, it galvanized European action and led to, among other things, an intensified sanctions regime.<sup>45</sup>



Leaders from Russia and Crimea sign the treaty of accession, completing the annexation of Crimea on March 18, 2014.

### Breaking from the Norms of Western-Oriented “Civil Society”

Exacerbating Europe’s concerns was Russia’s growing emphasis on the moral and religious aspects of its “Russianness,” harkening back to its more traditional “Slavophile” days.<sup>46</sup> This included resurrecting the notion of a “New Russia”; justifying its irredentist claims on territory within Eastern Europe containing ethnic Russian populations; tagging certain individuals and groups as treasonous; treating homosexuals and transgender persons as outcasts; and shutting down non-compliant media outlets and Web sites.<sup>47</sup> “Putinism,” with its emphasis on Russian morals and identity, became a label that attempted to describe the complex and troublingly autocratic and moralistic nature of the Russian regime.<sup>48</sup>

The term “illiberal democracy” resurfaced at around this same time.<sup>49</sup> A number of prominent European leaders within several EU countries used Putin’s policies as a model and a justification for their own erosion of personal rights within their nations.<sup>[50][51]</sup> Aided by a major media effort and attractive economic incentives, Moscow sought to erode the will and desire of struggling EU and NATO nations to honor their commitments to their allies and partners—including the EU’s determination to maintain its economic sanctions against Russia. By extension, another more strategic goal was to set the conditions to weaken and fracture the EU and, ultimately, NATO.<sup>52</sup> As discussed earlier, though such corrosive and destabilizing developments may bring Russia tactical short-term satisfaction, they would be catastrophic for the country in the long-term.

The migrant refugee wave, a crisis that continues to engulf Europe and weaken its

institutions, is a factor that could drive Russian relations with Europe specifically, and the West generally, in the near future. Russia is a spoiler in this and, curiously, can play the situation both ways. Its substantial and dangerously open-ended military intervention within Syria is creating even more refugees, orphans, and homeless individuals. Indeed, Russia has been accused, with considerable justification, of calculatingly “weaponizing” the migration flow to weaken European institutions.<sup>53</sup> If, however, a true ceasefire and a tenuous truce are maintained, with the resultant refugee flow staunch, Russia may be seen by Europe as part of a solution that could conceivably lead to a major, albeit extremely difficult, United Nations security and peacekeeping role in Syria in which Russia, a very active player in the UN, could have a major leadership role. Considered and forward-thinking diplomatic steps could net Putin numerous benefits, including a reconsideration of the sanctions regime levied on his country, especially if major steps were concurrently taken to solidify the 2015 Minsk II ceasefire agreement with Ukraine. While likely not part of Russia’s strategic calculus for entering the Syrian hornet’s nest, such a scenario could provide a possible “off ramp” to improved relations with the West (particularly with Europe and the United States), especially if a deal concerning the long-term resolution of the Bashar al Assad question is achieved. It is not in Russia’s long-term strategic interest to remain caught in Syria, choking on an endless combatant noose of its own making, thus working this angle could derive benefits. Further, open-ended involvement in tortured and byzantine conflicts like Syria could ultimately be detrimental for Russia domestically if something akin to the 1983 bombing of the

U.S. Marine Barracks in Beirut<sup>54</sup> or a widely publicized proxy atrocity, such as the massacre at Sabra and Shatila in 1982, were to occur.<sup>55</sup> In addition, it is likely that there will be more attacks throughout Russia proper by jihadists returning to the Caucasus and Central Asia from fighting in Syria and Iraq.<sup>56</sup>

### How the Strategic Environment has Changed for Russia

Less than a year after Crimea's annexation, major aspects of Russia's international relations, economy, and long-term security had already declined, especially in regard to Europe and the United States. These were strategic factors for Russia that did not exist at the height of its successful Sochi Olympic games that ended in February 2014. To briefly summarize:

- A mainstream sense of patriotism and pride across Ukraine that, while not necessarily anti-Russian, became decidedly pro-Ukrainian. In the 6-month period that encompassed the Maidan protests, the illegal annexation of Crimea, and the proxy invasion of eastern Ukraine, Russia awakened a sense of national purpose among more than 35 million primarily ethnic Ukrainians who would likely fight for their nation.
- The European Union, despite major schisms, including the impending Brexit, pulled together and levied major sanctions that have significantly hobbled Russia's economy and its ability to generate added wealth and production without major compromises. This has put significant pressure on Russia's business sector, including military modernization plans, while adding significant stress to the country domestically.<sup>57</sup>
- NATO regained its core focus. Reluctantly, but firmly, Article 5 returned to

its place of primacy. Although there are still members lagging behind on their obligations, those Allies deficient in committing the required two percent of their Gross Domestic Product to NATO's defense budget are reconsidering their individual budgets. NATO reaffirmed its Alliance obligations to its members, especially those in the east who acutely remember what it was like to be adrift in the so-called "Bloodlands" of the late 1930s.<sup>58</sup> The U.S. ceased its military retrograde from Europe and took significant steps, including a planned \$3.4 billion increase of Europe-related defense spending under the new European Reassurance Initiative (ERI), the use of prepositioned equipment, and the "heel to toe" rotating commitment of a heavy brigade to shore up NATO conventional defenses.<sup>59</sup>

- The Russian economy buckled. This included the unforeseen collapse of oil prices from over \$100 per barrel to approximately \$35 per barrel before the shooting down of the Malaysian passenger jet in July 2014.<sup>60</sup> Compounding Russia's woes, its ruble has devalued by over half since March 2014.<sup>[61][62]</sup> These near simultaneous occurrences—part market-driven, but also as a result of its reckless behavior—and the West-imposed sanctions have put enormous pressure on Russia's ability to sustain major operations and a military modernization program while maintaining the improved standard of living attained over the prior decade. Over time, this will jeopardize what the regime values most: a pliant population.

Finally, a more psychological and sociological change occurred. Russia became an international pariah state. Until its dramatic intervention in Syria in late October 2015, Russia, already seen as an outlier with its poorly

veiled military aggression, internal assault on civil society, and massively corrupt business practices, had isolated itself from much of the international community, certainly within the West. China, India, and Brazil, among others, did not censor Russia, however, keeping their trade links open. While Russia was petulantly dismissive of its suspension from the prestigious G8, the move had to have stung.<sup>63</sup>

The bottom line is that long-term trend lines for Russia are degrading rather than improving and will present considerable dangers in the immediate future. Neither Brexit nor the fallout from Turkey's recent failed coup attempt will change this. Nothing positive will come to pass for Russia in the long-term, however, unless it is able to mitigate its constant tension and confrontation with Europe, the United States, and the West.

### **Russia and the West—Avoiding Near-term Brinkmanship while Shaping the Future**

Despite the much-trumpeted publicity concerning Russia's temporarily successful gambit in Syria, the remaining strategic conditions that face Russia continue to hold it back. While its actions appear offensive, Russia as a nation is on the strategic defensive, focused more on weathering the strained status quo than on any great advances. Its military actions appear more preemptive and reactive than overtly offensive. The lattice of ethnic-Russian-populated enclaves in the former Soviet Union are all designed in part to block or freeze the ability of Western-oriented countries to break free of controlling Russian influences and join Western institutions. (This same pattern also explains the frozen conflicts in places such as Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and the Donbass.)<sup>64</sup> Ukraine, if its economy does not

implode under the weight of its own poor policies and endemic corruption, has broken from its orbit, and both the EU and NATO, while wobbly at times, are still holding consensus in respect to Russian misdeeds. While it has improved slightly, the petroleum-dependent Russian economy—suffering from sanctions, low oil prices and a devalued ruble—continues to struggle and over time will likely put Russians back onto the streets in protests and mass demonstrations. The brain drain continues, with many from the middle class leaving Russia to seek more promising opportunities abroad; even the so-called oligarchs and the financially privileged, although loyal to Russia to the last ruble and dollar, have exit strategies in comfortable arrangements in London, Paris, and New York or the warm Caribbean and Mediterranean islands to the south.<sup>65</sup>

As this essay goes to print, joint U.S., multinational, and NATO-linked Allied and Partner forces are involved in the aforementioned major series of defensively oriented exercises focused on Poland and the Baltic States, and stretching across eastern Europe into Georgia. Harkening back to 1961's Operation *Long Thrust*, these forces are not large enough to threaten offensively but are robust enough to show resolve and purpose to both Russia and to our regional allies and partners. During these critical demonstrations of assurance and deterrence, we must be mindful of real, but not contrived, Russian redlines. This includes the August 2014 actions of Ukrainian forces that were about to wipe out the ethnic Russian separatist enclaves of Donetsk and Lugansk, which resulted in a direct, if unattributed, Russian military incursion,<sup>66</sup> and the unambiguous and aggressive intervention in Syria in late September 2015 as it appeared the al Assad regime was about to



fall.<sup>67</sup> The rhetoric and indicators were evident in the runup to both; the West, unfortunately, failed to parse them out amidst the din of incessant media noise at the time.

While moving ahead with exercises in close proximity to Russian borders, we must pay close attention to Russian messaging, as evinced by their recent actions that have included aggressive fly-bys in the Baltic Sea. We must also proactively and repeatedly consult with the Russian military, and even offer to exchange observers in order to mitigate any Russian sense of threat from these real, but relatively modest, shows of force. The exercises must be widely publicized, including within Russia itself, in order to combat the inflammatory disinformation that will inevitably spew forth from Russian media about “threatening and provocative NATO activities.” Whether U.S.-led, multinational, or NATO, these deterrent, regionally assuring exercises will be lumped together in the Russian narrative. Therefore, public information is a key area that must be improved upon; we in the West are not particularly adept at “wielding the truth” in a coordinated and timely manner, while for Russia information operations are a strategic non-linear operational front. Furthermore, the dearth of U.S. and Russian operational-level military-to-military (M2M) contact is dangerously insufficient, and leaves both sides open to major misunderstandings and miscalculations that could lead to rapid escalation and brinkmanship. With some personal relations established, key leaders could start to whittle down this increasingly dangerous trust deficit even if they disagree on many issues.

### Russia’s Existential Challenge

It is my hope that both the current and the upcoming crop of political leaders in the West

and the Putin regime (which could remain entrenched for the next eight years) have the foresight, gravitas, and credibility to understand and to modulate the differences between assurance, deterrence, and provocation, and break Russia from its ongoing schizophrenic relationship with the West. It will not happen overnight, as the Russian regime is more obsessed with its jaundiced perception of liberal Western thoughts, mores, and economy than the NATO conventional threat. Over time, however, the current Russian-Western animus can and must lessen as the colossal pressures emergent in the rest of the world highlight our obvious convergences—terror, demographics, resources, and migration, to name but a few—that are often occluded by the bile and rhetoric of the current stunted and distrustful relationship. Russia will fail, perhaps catastrophically, if it does not knit itself more credibly with the West. The West, in turn, must continue its firm but patient response to Russian transgressions while resolving a host of challenges that include a weakened EU and the migrant crisis. My biggest concern is that something terrible—something that neither side wants but that could result should Russia be pushed to the brink during this tense and petulant intermediary period—will occur. Therefore, it is critical that we work to find mechanisms to focus on the positive, while managing and ameliorating the extremely dangerous negatives during this pivotal period in our challenged relations.

Despite its rhetoric to the contrary, Russia needs the West. Both will need each other to survive and prosper in the next generation. Beset with growing problems along much of its vast periphery, demographically challenged Russia must find, for its salvation as a politically viable nation-state in future generations,

a credible and peaceful *modus vivendi* with the West. If not, it will fail, and the always (but not infinitely) patient Russian population will inevitably turn on the regime's false narrative that blames all of Russia's woes on external factors, especially the United States and the West, more generally. Despite the rhetoric and disinformation, I believe that much of Russia's leadership, its business community, and its better-connected-than-we-think population already sense this despite the mind-bending disinformation. While currently prudent foreign policy for Russia, any long-term, strategic relationship with an increasingly resource-rapacious China will always place it in a subordinate role fraught with potential existential risk and no prospect of major gain. Further, business in Central Asia and the Caucasus will always produce marginal results. Somehow, then, Russia needs to let go of its anti-Western psychosis and corresponding rhetoric and disinformation and focus on the many next-generation threats, challenges, and opportunities that it and the West must face together. The West, in turn, must continue a dual track of pushing back firmly against Russian transgressions while at the same time patiently and firmly working with Russia to better establish critical confidence-building conduits and arenas for mutually beneficial cooperation. We want Russia to rejoin the peaceful mainstream of law-abiding nations rather than lash out militarily or collapse precipitously, situations that would be extremely dangerous for Russia itself, the West, and the entire world. **PRISM**

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## Photos

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