



A REVANCHIST RUSSIA VERSUS AN UNCERTAIN WEST: AN APPRECIATION OF THE SITUATION SINCE THE 2014 UKRAINIAN CRISIS

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More than a generation has passed since the Berlin Wall came down, the Soviet Union ceased to exist, and the contest between East and West that had lasted more than 40 years ended. The average European would have been 15 years old at the time, hardly politically conscious. (More than half of the American population would have been a mere nine years old.) In the contemporary accelerated time frames of the West, those events are ancient history – but not to Russia’s current leadership steeped in the history of imperial Russia and the Soviet Union.¹

¹ I want to thank Ognian Shentov, Chairman of the Center for the Study of Democracy in Sofia, Bulgaria, for inviting me to write this essay on Russia’s challenge to the West and to present my assessment at a recent Round Table at the Center. This has given me the opportunity and the impetus to put down on paper subjects that I have had the privilege of discussing with Ognian and his colleagues for a number of years. I would also like to compliment the Center on its excellent new report on growing Russian economic influence in Eastern Europe, which has been extremely well received in the United States. See: Heather A. Conley, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, A Report of the CSIS Europe Program and the CSD Economics Program, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

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KEY POINTS

- An aggressive Russia, a divided and unsettled Europe, and a distracted and unpredictable United States have created an unprecedented and perilous confluence of events.
- Russian strategy recognizes that the role of non-military means of achieving its goals has grown, and in many cases, exceeding the power of weapons. Warfare today involves the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures. Its goal is the manipulation of perceptions.
- Countering Russia’s influence, accomplished through economic coercion, corruption, and state capture will require more than redeploying NATO battalions. It will necessitate a fundamental reformulation of EU and U.S. strategy. The U.S. Congress has called for increased efforts aimed at stifling Russian attempts to “exert covert influence over peoples and governments.”
- The United States can look for ways to encourage greater foreign investment, protect investors against local predators, back local entrepreneurs, and use its own intelligence resources and the expertise it has gained in investigating financial crimes, money laundering, and terrorist financing to provide investigative assistance in nailing local offenders.
- The Western allies and Russia conceivably could achieve through dialogue some kind of constructive modus vivendi whereby Russia becomes a less paranoid power that respects the independence of its former empire. A long shot to begin with, such a rapprochement is less achievable if Europe and the United States appear disorganized and vulnerable.

Today, there is an unprecedented confluence of an ambitious and aggressive Russia, a divided and unsettled Europe becoming more so lately, and a distracted and unpredictable United States. It is not my intention to renew Cold War rhetoric. Labeling Russia “revanchist” – a seemingly old-fashioned term – perfectly describes its current foreign policy.

Russia is determined to recover recognition of its status as a global superpower and to restore, as much as possible, the influence, if not the territory, lost when the Soviet Union fell.

And to describe the West as “uncertain” also seems appropriate. The European Union (EU) faces multiple crises, while for the first time in nearly 70 years, the United States has elected a president who during his campaign expressed disdain for the Western alliance and his open admiration for Russia’s authoritarian leader. President-elect Trump’s campaign rhetoric is an unreliable guide to what he will do in office, but even raising questions about the American commitment to its European allies has caused consternation both in Europe and the United States.

Any appreciation of the situation must address four fundamental questions that have been much debated in recent months:

1. What are Russia’s objectives?
2. What is the nature of the Russian challenge?
3. What effects will Russia’s actions have on the EU, the NATO alliance, and the United States?
4. What should be done?

Before proceeding, I must insert a caveat about my own credentials. I am straying out of my usual intellectual pasture: I am not an expert in Russian or European diplomatic history. I was never a Cold Warrior. I have devoted most of my professional life to the study of terrorism.

As a historical footnote, however, terrorism was the topic that brought me to Moscow in the late 1980s as part of a small team of American analysts who met with Soviet officials to discuss whether, despite their strategic differences, the Soviet Union and the United States could find enough common ground to cooperate in combating terrorism. During these discussions, our Soviet interlocutors revealed how much they were then concerned that the United States was bent upon dismembering the Soviet Union.² That suspicion continues.

I also have long personal experience with Bulgaria. I have been visiting Bulgaria for the past 25 years, meeting with its officials and business leaders, and, while I have witnessed remarkable positive changes, I can also speak with first-hand experience about some of the darker sides of its economic and political evolution that Russia now exploits. President Putin did not invent oligarchs or introduce greed or corruption to Bulgaria. But he has weaponized them to advance Russian national interests.

Finally, my research on terrorism has pointed to a development that I am not sure America’s own military strategists fully appreciate, but which is important in understanding Russian strategy. Warfare today has less to do with what happens on the battlefield and more to do with the manipulation of perceptions. This situation is not new. Ancient Chinese strategists sought to win wars without waging a single battle. But the industrialized warfare in the 20th century, in which the United States triumphed, still dominates American military thinking, even though terrorists and other asymmetric foes have taught us that power does not always accrue to those with the most or the biggest guns. Remarkably, some in the United States today fear being destroyed by Islamic militants, who possess no modern weapons and in terms of military manpower rank somewhere between Bolivia and Uganda.

² Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Possibility of Soviet-American Cooperation against Terrorism*, Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 1989, and; Jenkins, “How Russia Can and Can’t Help Obama,” *Foreign Policy*, August 26, 2009. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/08/26/how-russia-can-and-cant-help-obama/>

What are Russia's objectives?

What does President Putin want and how does he expect to get it? Inherent in this question are two assumptions: The first is that Vladimir Putin, who has held the positions of prime minister or president of Russia since 1999, will continue to dominate Russia's political leadership for the foreseeable future. The second is that clashes between Putin's vision and the visions of those on the Western side of Russia's frontier will lead to further confrontations.

Putin's objectives may be less mystical and possibly less religious than those of Russia's tsars, and more related to old Bolshevik fears. The British and the Americans opposed the 1917 Russian revolution and in the final year of World War I sent an expeditionary force to crush it. Although that expedition failed, in Russian eyes, this historical hostility has never ended.

Paramount among Putin's concerns is Russia's long-standing fear of losing territory, even of dismemberment. In two bloody wars, Russia crushed Chechnya's bid for independence, but the Caucasus remains a restive region. Putin also worries about the advance of an aggressive Islam – a concern that goes back centuries and is one that is shared by the United States.

When the American analysts met with Soviet officials to discuss cooperation against terrorism in the late 1980s, they were surprised by the Soviets' concerns. The United States provides Afghan rebels with weapons, said one Soviet participant. Soviet troops are withdrawing. When the last Soviet soldier has crossed the frontier and the Mujahidin keep coming, will the United States continue to supply them with arms? To put it bluntly, is the United States still interested in bringing about the breakup of the Soviet Union itself?³

The Soviet Union broke up as a consequence of internal factors, not U.S. intervention. Still, the West celebrated the breakup and from Moscow's perspective remains determined to encircle contemporary Russia,

thereby ensuring its continued weakness. Dismissed in the West as paranoia, Putin's portrayal of Russia besieged by implacable foes resonates with Russian and Soviet historic memory and helps explain, at least in part, his domestic popularity.

Although well aware of its own weaknesses, Imperial Russia nevertheless accepted the risks of war in 1914 in large measure because its leaders feared that backing down might turn Russia into another China or Ottoman Empire, vulnerable to dismemberment by the other Great Powers. With losses of more than 20 million people in World War II, Stalin was determined to create a buffer zone of friendly states around Russia to ensure that Russia could never be invaded again.

Putin considered the collapse of the Soviet Union to have been a disaster. In the same 2005 speech, Putin noted that the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself. He was referring to the secessionist movements in a number of Russia's ethnic republics. The most notable among these were declarations of independence by the Tatars and Chechens. Although they remained in the Russian Federation as autonomous republics, it exposed a continuing vulnerability.

Putin and the Kremlin's generals also drew lessons from the ethnic wars, which led to the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. In Moscow's eyes, the West played a nefarious role in the ultimate partition of the country, ending in the overthrow of its central government (and Moscow's local ally) in Belgrade. Moscow's interpretation of these events influence Russia's current strategy.

The 2014 crisis in Ukraine enabled Russian propagandists to renew this powerful historical theme and at the same time reverse the slide in Putin's approval ratings, which had declined steadily since 2008 to an all-time low of 54 percent. Intervention in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea paid off. Between late 2013 and midsummer 2014, Putin's popularity rose to 83 percent – matching his earlier all-time high in 2008.⁴

³ Jenkins, *The Possibilities of Soviet-American Cooperation against Terrorism*, *op.cit.*

⁴ Julie Ray and Neli Esipova, "Russian Approval of Putin Soars to Highest in Years," *Gallup*, July 18, 2014. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/173597/russian-approval-putin-soars-highest-level-years.aspx>

The alternate narrative presented by the West based upon its belief that a democratic Russia, operating as a free market economy, could be incorporated into Western institutions, including partnering with NATO, never gained much traction in Russia.⁵ Instead, western efforts to democratize Russia, including Western support for Russian civil society, were perceived as anti-Russian, and, despite Western assurances and attempts to incorporate Russia into Western security structures, Russia still sees NATO as a hostile entity. It is an alliance originally created in 1949 to contain the Soviet Union and NATO's possible expansion beyond Eastern Europe into the former Soviet republics is viewed in Moscow as aggression. Fears of continued encroachment by a hostile West – and even fears of dismemberment – continue to haunt Russia's leadership.

Putin made this clear in his 2007 speech to the Munich Security Conference:

“NATO has put its frontline forces on our borders... it is obvious that...[this] expansion does not have any relation with...ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation...we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to the assurances our western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? NATO's General Secretary on May 17, 1990, said that ‘the fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee.’ Where are these guarantees?”⁶

Putin will not tolerate a foreign military alliance on Russia's doorstep; in his view, the eastward expansion of Western military alliances must be stopped. Georgia's determination to join NATO prompted a Russian invasion of that country in 2008 and the creation of two tiny Russian protectorates.

Nothing is more important to Russia than Ukraine and the United States is aware of this sensitivity.

President Bush considered fast tracking Ukraine for NATO membership after Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, but thought better of it and backed off. The popular uprising in 2014 that led to the overthrow of Ukraine's pro-Moscow government may have caught the Russian government momentarily unprepared, as it did the West, but Russia's response was consistent with its long-term strategic view. Russia took over and annexed Crimea and supported an on-going uprising in eastern Ukraine.

Moldova's overtures to the West – it is a partner, but not a member of NATO – guarantee continued Russian occupation of the separatist enclave in Transnistria, which Russia recognizes as an independent republic. In November 2016, voters in Moldova elected a new pro-Russian president who vows to reorient Moldova away from the EU and pursue closer ties with Russia. Moldova's pro-Western prime minister and parliament control foreign policy but are held responsible for the economic distress caused by a Russian embargo on Moldovan wine and for a massive corruption scandal, which voters blame on the pro-EU elite. At the same time, Russia has systematically exploited the same corruption to control key oligarchs in the country and to dominate through them any government in power, even if it is nominally pro-EU.

Russia threatens but has not intervened militarily in the Baltic republics, which are members of both NATO and the EU. As required by the treaty, an overt Russian attack on Latvia, Lithuania, or Estonia would risk provoking a NATO response, and thus far, Putin remains cautious. But fears of Russian aggression have prompted both Sweden and Finland, neither of which are members of NATO (and have historically promoted their respective neutrality), to sign bilateral agreements intending to ensure closer collaboration with the United States on defense matters. Increased Finnish cooperation with the West has in turn provoked Russian reminders that Finland itself once belonged to Imperial Russia.

⁵ A well-informed and thorough analysis of U.S. policy toward Russia in the post-Soviet era can be found in: Angela E. Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014.

⁶ Vladimir Putin, “Putin's Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy,” *Washingtonpost.com*, February 12, 2007. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/12/AR2007021200555.html>

Russia is engaged in a continuing effort to maintain its traditional influence in Serbia, even as that country negotiates to join NATO. Russia also appears determined to keep Montenegro out of the Western orbit, to the point of reportedly supporting an attempted coup and assassination of Montenegro's pro-Western prime minister.

Years ago, Putin said that his historic mission was to restore the Soviet Union, minus Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, which he felt were irretrievably lost. More recently, he has made references to "New Russia," which actually refers to historical Russian territory under the tsars. This vast land empire can be seen on maps showing Russian expansion from 1500 to the latter part of the 19th century, when Russia extended from the Arctic Sea to the borders of Persia and Afghanistan and from the middle of Poland to the Pacific Ocean (including until 1867, present-day Alaska).

Literally reconstructing the Soviet Union or reclaiming a Romanov Russian empire probably will remain a dream for Putin. Russia lacks the military muscle and economic resources to re-conquer the vast and disparate republics that once comprised the USSR, and the ideological fervor of the Communist Revolution that drove political expansion across the Eurasian landmass no longer exists. Nor is there a defeated Germany and devastated Eastern Europe lying in ruins, creating political vacuum that Russia can fill. Putin's public remarks about historical Russia and the need to protect Russian speakers abroad recall Tsarist pretensions of pan-Slavism and Orthodox solidarity. They win applause from Russian nationalists upon whom he appears to be increasingly relying for domestic political support, but that appeal is limited to people of Russian ethnicity. Putin has sought to counter this limitation by emphasizing a broader state nationalism that transcends ethnic boundaries.

The expansion of the EU to Eastern Europe and the Baltic countries represents a different sort of challenge to Russia. Although some of the newer members are still works in progress, the EU has created more-democratic and more-prosperous nations whose very existence provides a source of comparison and envy

that can be seen by authoritarian rulers as subversive. Therefore, Putin wants to create a buffer zone of permanent instability (if not passive client states) in Ukraine and other border countries to ensure that they will pose no threat to Russian security and that they will not offer enviable democratic, prosperous, Western-oriented alternatives.

Putin's public comments indicate that he views Western concepts of individual freedom and the aggressive advancement of certain social causes as threats to traditional Russian values. His administration has been characterized by the imposition of greater government controls (both direct and indirect) not just on Russia's economy, but on its media, nongovernment organizations, and individual activists. Unfettered criticism of the government, fomenting public disorder, and Western-inspired social campaigns are depicted as contrary to traditional Russian values – actions on their behalf are not merely offensive to the public, they are subversive to the state and are to be actively countered.

In keeping with his desire to regain Russia's superpower status, Putin is determined to exert Russian influence beyond Europe. In 2015, Russia intervened in Syria, a long-time ally, to save the Syrian government and, more importantly, protect its own interests in the Middle East, which are now largely confined to Syria. Syria's civil war has provided Russia with the opportunity to demonstrate its military resurgence and its willingness to use it ruthlessly to achieve its objectives, as well as to make Russia an essential party to any resolution of the Syrian conflict.

Russia's assertive policies also bring domestic political benefits. They appeal to Russian nationalists, distract domestic criticism of the lack of freedom and economic stagnation (Russia's GDP fell 3 percent in 2015), and bolster Putin's image as a strong, heroic leader.

In sum, Russia seeks to reestablish an empire not of military conquest, but of dominance and influence. NATO advances must be blocked, and to the extent possible, rolled back. Potential opponents on Russia's periphery must be kept weak and subservient. The eastward expansion of EU membership must be

discouraged, while Russia must protect itself against Western values it regards as subversive. Traditionally pro-Russian nations such as Belarus and Serbia must be kept in Russia's orbit. Where possible, Russia will assert its right to protect Russian minorities against anti-Russian policies and governments and will even create pro-Russian buffers, as it has done in Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. Former Communist Bloc countries, including those already in the EU and NATO, must be subverted, destabilized, or intimidated, while Europe itself must be constrained from acting to challenge vital Russian interests. Some would argue that Russia is not trying to constrain Europe, but is determined to actively to undermine the EU and Europe's relationship with the United States.

Clearly, many motives drive Russian behavior – historic claims, leftover fears, continuing suspicions, contemporary ambitions, geopolitical opportunism – and this suggests that Russian policy will continue on its current trajectory, barring a fundamental change in the political structure that removes Putin or obliges him to dramatically reverse course. Economic weakness at home may accentuate Russia's aggressive behavior abroad as a distraction. However, analysts point out that Russia also invaded Georgia amid high oil prices, suggesting that the state of its economy is not the sole determinant of Russian policy.

What is the nature of the Russian challenge?

What tools and methods has Putin used to achieve his goals? Not armored divisions (although Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic republics might beg to differ). Instead, Putin's strategy comprises a far more diverse and sophisticated arsenal of "weapons" and tactics. Some of these are recognizable updates of Soviet or even tsarist statecraft. Others are new and reflect fundamental changes in technology and the nature of war. The contemporary concept of warfare, which is less about military operations and more about the manipulation of perceptions, is not the type of contest in which the United States has traditionally excelled.

Military might and a demonstrated willingness to fight. Military muscle is just one component of Russia's plan. After a decline in military power in the immediate post-Cold War 1990s, Russia has invested heavily in modernizing its armed forces to operate locally and globally on an impressive scale, which also helps to support Russia's stagnant economy. But Russia's power has less to do with the weapons themselves and more to do with Russia's willingness to use its military power. Russian forces brutally crushed the Chechen rebellion, openly invaded Georgia, and currently bomb Syrian rebels in the name of fighting the Islamic extremists. Russian troops took off their insignias to invade Crimea. In eastern Ukraine, Russia encouraged and organized local militias, which Russian forces then supported on both sides of the border. These operations demonstrate that Russia is willing to fight – a psychological advantage over others that are less willing to do so. The large nuclear arsenal that Russia retains also makes a huge difference. The Cold War may be over, but Western leaders still fear that any military confrontation with a nuclear-armed Russia runs the risk of escalation into a disastrous conflagration.

Russia under Putin has modernized its conventional forces while Russian strategists have been thinking about how to project power by other than military means. In Russia's view, non-military measures have surpassed military force as a means of achieving strategic gains. Intriguingly, the inspiration for Russia's new form of warfare comes in large measure from the United States, beginning with Russia's analysis of U.S. actions in the former Yugoslavia and later in the so-called "color revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan.

While most analysts including those in Yugoslavia itself saw the breakup of Yugoslavia as the result of complex internal dynamics, Russian strategists interpreted it as U.S.-sponsored regime change. According to the Russian view, using democratization, peace-keeping, and humanitarian concerns as pretexts for military intervention, the United States encouraged political dissent, supported the separatists, and secretly funded dissidents against Yugoslavia's central government. The United Nations imposed arms embargo on all belligerents in Yugoslavia, which the

United States later unilaterally lifted in order to send arms to Croatia and Bosnia. Western NGOs provided regime opponents with humanitarian aid while the United States, working through private contractors, sent military advisors to help train Croatia's army. Direct military intervention followed. NATO imposed no-fly zones, shot down Yugoslav aircraft and then, with UN approval, bombed Serb forces in Bosnia in 1995 and government targets in Serbia during the 1999 Kosovo War. Special operations augmented the air campaign while Western media outlets, notably CNN and BBC, portrayed these military interventions as necessary and justified, but the result was the destruction of Yugoslavia and ultimately the removal of its leader.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq (ostensibly to find weapons of mass destruction) in 2003 and NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya (ostensibly to prevent an imminent massacre) offer further examples of Western-sponsored regime change. The color revolutions illustrated additional techniques. Western NGOs trained local opposition activists. Western-oriented media outlets shaped local and international opinion. Social media evaded government surveillance and helped coordinate protests. Moscow sees itself as a potential target of similar machinations, which explains much of the government's deep suspicion of domestic dissent and foreign-funded NGOs.⁷

Russia's strategic planners see in these same events the schema of a new mode of warfare. This was addressed in an article written in 2013 by General Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of the Russian General Staff.⁸ Although the general's comments have since come to be known as the "Gerasimov Doctrine," the article is more of a call for analysis of the changes in modern warfare than a formula for war fighting.

Gerasimov begins his initial article by referring to "color revolutions" and the conflicts resulting from the Arab Spring, noting that "a perfectly thriving state, in a matter of months and even days, can be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war."⁹ Gerasimov does not see these events merely as a modern phenomenon, but implies that they are the result of a broader Western strategy of war. "The very 'rules of war' have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness."

Gerasimov goes on to note, "The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures – applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population." In Gerasimov's view, internal opposition does not arise, it is created and stoked from the outside in order to weaken the target state and prepare the way for external intervention.

Nonmilitary measures are supplemented by military means. The use of force may be concealed, for example, training rebels and supplying them with weapons and other assistance, using private military contractors rather than national forces, employing special operations, and reinforcing irregular opposition forces with foreign fighters or volunteers.

Overt invasions are a thing of the past. Instead, the internal conflict provides pretexts for foreign military operations, which can be justified as crisis management, peacekeeping, protecting foreign nationals, preventing massacres, or disarming weapons of mass

⁷ Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*.

⁸ The original article by General Valery Gerasimov, "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations," was published by VPK (*Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier*), February 26, 2013. http://vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK_08_476.pdf Robert Coalson provided a translation of the article on Facebook, June 21, 2014. <https://m.facebook.com/notes/robert-coalson/russian-military-doctrine-article-by-general-valery-gerasimov/10152184862563597/>. An analysis of the piece can be found in Charles K. Bartles, "Getting Gerasimov Right," *Military Review*, January-February 2016. http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20160228_art009.pdf

⁹ Gerasimov, "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations," op.cit.

destruction. These allow open military interference – the use of high tech military force resulting ultimately in regime change and dismemberment of the targeted state. One can see in this a Russian interpretation of what happened in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Ukraine, Libya, and Syria, and the outlines of Russia’s own actions in Ukraine in 2014.

Gerasimov does not offer a detailed catalogue of nonmilitary measures, but recognizes the critical role they play in a coordinated strategy. Neither does he abdicate the use of nonmilitary measures to the exclusive domain of nonmilitary agencies. He does not delineate an organizational division between hard and soft power.

It is tempting to read into Gerasimov’s observation that information technologies can be used “for influencing state structures and the population with the help of information networks” a foreshadowing of Russia’s hacking during the 2016 U.S. elections. That may be over analysis. Intriguingly, however, recent reports link the hacking specifically to the GRU, Russia’s military intelligence service.¹⁰ The GRU also played the principal roles in Russian operations in eastern Ukraine. Identical lines of malicious code were used in the Democratic National Committee hack in the United States as in the mobile phone application hack that targeted Ukrainian artillery.

Russia has also used its military power to intimidate its neighbors, massing its troops and conducting large-scale military maneuvers on their frontiers. Its military aircraft continuously probe and violate airspace, forcing defenders to scramble interceptors. These nerve-wracking bluffs sustain a crisis atmosphere that provokes consternation and internal debate. They also discourage investment, thereby increasing economic difficulties in already struggling frontier states. Russian fighters also have recently buzzed U.S. naval ships. Several months ago, Russia moved nuclear-capable missiles to Kaliningrad.

The plot to assassinate Montenegro’s pro-NATO prime minister suggests that Russia is willing to resort to high-risk covert actions when it calculates that these can make a difference, are important enough, and that Russia can get away with them.

Corruption and economic influence. As the Center for the Study of Democracy’s new study *The Kremlin’s Playbook* shows, Russian oil and gas have brought the Kremlin considerable economic power, which, not surprisingly, it has sought to translate into political influence. Russia’s vast oil and gas reserves also enable it to offer exploration and development deals to the major European and U.S. energy companies that then are more likely to support Russian interests or at least undercut political initiatives that may harm Russian interests.¹¹ Not only is Russia a key supplier of energy, it uses pricing to create dependencies that can be sustained only by conforming to Russia’s political interests. It sets up local subsidiaries and distribution companies designed to provide lucrative arrangements for local oligarchs and corrupt politicians.

Through these local beneficiaries, many of whom own newspapers and broadcasting companies as part of their business empires, Russia expands its control over the media, which it uses to support or attack local politicians and scuttle plans to create alternative energy sources. This works best in countries that have weak political institutions and high levels of corruption.

In its battles with Russia’s own oligarchs, Putin’s government has acquired a good understanding of the post-communism phenomenon of corrupt oligarchies, and Russia benefits from their existence in a variety of ways. Their greed and thin loyalties can be exploited to advance Russia’s political objectives. At the same time, the domination of local economies and governments by corrupt politicians creates a source of continuing popular discontent that ensures continued instability and weakness.

¹⁰ Thomas Fox-Brewster, “This Android Malware Ties Russian Intelligence To The DNC Hacks,” *Forbes*, December 22, 2016. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2016/12/22/android-howitzer-app-gru-hac-of-dnc-russian-link-crowdstrike/#52f7b21b2f03>

¹¹ Conley, Mina, Stefanov, and Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook*, op. cit.

The 25 years of transition to democracy and market economies in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have resulted in formal success, including membership in NATO and the EU. Some countries, like Poland, have done well economically, and some have built strong state institutions, but many face glaring deficits, most notably in the area of rule of law. This, coupled with the vacuum of leadership and recent economic weakness, makes these countries extremely vulnerable to Russian influence. With the exception of Poland and, despite the heavy Russian ethnic, economic, and political presence, the Baltic Republics, the post-communist countries and their institutions are too weak to counteract Russia's aggressive policies and actions.

Some in these countries saw the EU as a supranational authority that would rein in local oligarchs, strengthen the rule of law, and reduce corruption. In this regard, the EU has disappointed. Although the necessary rules are in place, the organization has been timid in its efforts to counteract corruption. Its recent anticorruption report is seen as very weak, especially when compared with reports issued by nongovernment organizations such as Transparency International.¹² The reluctance of the EU to act more forcefully may reflect the desire of politicians not to rock the boat for their counterparts abroad or to interfere too much in the internal politics of sovereign nations. It may also reflect constraints imposed by the EU's own corruption issues.

As the headlines indicate, few of the older members of the EU can claim immunity from high-level corruption. Without endorsing European hypocrisy in pretending to oppose corruption in Eastern Europe while plagued by corruption scandals at home, however, I must emphasize that there is a qualitative difference between corruption in countries that have strong government institutions, independent legal systems, and a free press and corruption in countries where fledgling political institutions remain weak and the

legal system is a servant of the party in power. In the latter, the oligarchs and their confederates in government run no risk of prosecution. This encourages what may be described as predatory corruption.

Not content with the enormous wealth they already possess, and with fewer state assets for sale (the original driver of their wealth), the predators go after any profitable enterprise. Complicit government officials create problems for targeted firms, depriving them of licenses, changing zoning laws, and in some cases bringing spurious charges, all with the goal of bringing about desperate sales at distressed prices. The initiative for the sales can come from the oligarch or the politician making the purchase – both share the spoils. This is an effective way of accumulating wealth in the hands of a very few while destroying wealth creation. I personally have witnessed this sort of pressure in Bulgaria.

It is evidence of "state capture," an extreme form of corruption that can be defined as a combination of different forms of corruption, which have a single objective: to secure wholesale and long term privileges to captors by exploiting the power of the state for private benefit. It is "the usurpation of state institutions for the benefit of well-connected individuals."¹³ The Center for the Study of Democracy has recently produced an important working paper diagnosing the various forms of state capture and offering a means of measurement.¹⁴

Given the EU's disappointing performance, some people in countries that are not yet members see Putin as the tamer of the oligarchs, although this applies only to oligarchs who have opposed him politically. Many in the former communist countries, put off by the depredations of Eastern European-style capitalism and ostentatious concentrations of wealth in the hands of a few, see a return of Russian leadership in nostalgic terms. Except for impoverished pensioners and ideological diehards, few believe in

¹² European Commission, *Report from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: EU Anti-Corruption Report*, Brussels, February 3, 2014.

¹³ Center for the Study of Democracy, *State Capture Diagnostics Roadmap*, Sofia, Bulgaria, August 2016.

¹⁴ Ibid.

the restoration of communism, but for many, a return of Russian-style governance recalls a more egalitarian society with greater social discipline.

Although Communist rulers and the supporting party nomenklatura acquired wealth and privilege, former members of the Bulgarian state security service told me that there were checks on personal greed. Conspicuous displays of wealth, except for perhaps the supreme leader, were discouraged. They reflected poorly on the party's image. Flagrant abuses and egregious corruption were quietly dealt with by the security service. When Communism fell, power was assumed by a new set of leaders, many of whom, during Communist rule, had been targets of the same security apparatus for other reasons.

Doubting the loyalty of the old regime's spies and fearing that they might plot against the government, the new political leadership dismantled the security services – the former security officials assured me that they were patriots, loyal to the country and would have served the new government. The breakup of the services settled scores and removed a perceived threat. It is hard to say whether it would have made a difference in the long-term trajectory set during the tumultuous transition from communism to capitalism, but the dismantling of the security service deprived the new government of experienced investigative talent and an enforcement capability that could have checked the onslaught of the first generation of mafias and oligarchs. Instead, more than a few out-of-work intelligence officials found employment on the other side while the state had to begin over again rebuilding a capable investigative arm. By this time, however, the balance of power had shifted and the new state services themselves became targets of state capture by the very elements they were intended to control.

Control of mass media and information warfare. Working primarily through local oligarchs in post-communist countries, many of whom own newspapers

and other media outlets as part of their empires, Russia is able to mobilize support for policies and people it favors. These range from campaigns to prevent the development of local energy alternatives that might undermine dependency on Russian gas to support for Russian allies and punishment of political foes.

Unlike the clumsy, obvious Soviet propaganda machine of the Cold War era, Russia's current news media enterprises are much slicker and free of communist content. Through its own media outlets, notably RT (the television network originally called Russia Today), the Russian government amplifies revelations of the West's own shortcomings, which often come from Western critics themselves – corruption, democracy's failures, society's flaws, opposition to government policies. During the 2016 election campaign in the United States, many Trump supporters turned to RT, where broadcasts resonated with their own suspicions and discontents despite the fact that a number of RT's presenters are often leftwing.

Russia now stands accused of planting fake stories – an old tsarist technique – although the extent of this disinformation effort is debated. U.S. intelligence officials believe that Russia was behind a hacking campaign aimed at embarrassing the presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton and, more broadly, discrediting the integrity of U.S. elections.¹⁵ This is a thrust into new territory – one that changes unwritten rules and is provocative, although Putin may see it as no different from then Secretary of State Clinton's support for protests in Russia against his re-election. Nonetheless, it again underscores Russia's willingness to use its power in a variety of ways.

Financing political parties. Russia derives benefit from anger over corruption while at the same time employing local oligarchs and corrupt politicians to advance its goals. It seeks control of the security services and mass media and utilizes alliances with diverse groups and modern public-relations techniques to reduce opposition and maintain Europe's dependence

¹⁵ Ellen Nakashima, "U.S. government officially accuses Russia of hacking campaign to interfere with elections," *Washington Post*, October 7, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-government-officially-accuses-russia-of-hacking-campaign-to-influence-elections/2016/10/07/4e0b9654-8cbf-11e6-875e-2c1bfe943b66_story.html?utm_term=.d2278b7d1686

on Russian energy exports, making it more difficult to impose sanctions.

The new Russian strategy seeks influence through sophisticated political warfare without the baggage of communist ideology. It feeds on the disillusion and discontents that afflict many of the former communist states. It exploits weak government institutions and the absence of the rule of law, but instead of offering a revolutionary alternative, Russia seeks to destabilize and further weaken the surrounding states. Its alliance with socialist parties is pragmatic, not ideological. Russia is capable of equally supporting right-wing groups, environmentalists, and other seemingly unlikely partners – basically any political movement that radically opposes the existing status quo. These parties, although usually capable of attracting only small constituencies, represent popular causes. Russia does not need to have high expectations for them. The proliferation of small parties makes governing more difficult and adds to the already present political instability, which serves Russian interests.

Party loyalty is declining. Factions now divide parties once united by ideology or political philosophy. Political movements gathering around a narrow cause or a celebrity have proliferated. Oligarchs have created their own parties, consisting mainly of rent seekers. Control requires assembling fragile coalitions that can more easily destabilize a government.

Control of state security services. In addition to controlling mass media, Russia seeks, through its alliances with local oligarchs and corrupt politicians, to control state security services. The objective here is not traditional espionage but access to another lever of power. In Russia, this arrangement has been perfected.

Shared conservative values. Putin's opposition to the social agenda championed by the West also resonates among many religious conservatives outside of Russia. Putin represents a different set of values,

expressed, in part, through the church. Reportedly deeply religious, he has become an important patron of the Russian Orthodox Church. With his support, the church has gained in strength and become a key ally in advancing Russian national interests abroad. In 2007, Putin engineered the reunification of the Russian Orthodox Church with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia. This put the hundreds of Russian Orthodox Churches abroad under control of Moscow's leadership, which, in turn, gave the Kremlin another instrument of influence abroad.¹⁶

Europe's immigration crisis, mounting terrorist threat, and populist backlash have given Putin a number of political allies, including François Fillon, who could be the next president of France. Fillon, who is socially conservative and deeply critical of U.S. policy, is widely seen to be a friend of President Putin. Fillon himself sees Russia as France's natural ally against Islamic extremists. He opposes the economic sanctions currently imposed on Russia as a consequence of its actions in Ukraine – he believes it was the West that provoked Russia in Ukraine. Fillon shares these positions with Marine Le Pen, the presumed presidential candidate of France's far right National Front Party, which is funded by Russia, and an admirer of President Putin.

Putin's advantage is his ability to orchestrate this diverse collection of techniques to achieve its national objectives in each country. How Russia applies them varies according to the situation and the terrain.¹⁷ The overall goal is to maintain a buffer of economically dependent, politically unstable, and, deprived of NATO membership, militarily weak states on its frontiers while creating Trojan horses to undermine the unity of the NATO alliance and the EU.

To achieve these ends, *The Kremlin Playbook* notes that Russian influence in Central and Eastern Europe follows two tracks: One aims at dominating strategic sectors of the economy and exploiting weaknesses

¹⁶ Lauren Goodrich, "Post-Soviet Russia's Resurgent Church," *Wikileaks*. https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/attach/178/178398_Foundations%20-%20.doc

¹⁷ The idea of orchestration comes from a 2014 article by Jelena Milic, who describes sector by sector how Russia has increased its influence in Serbia. Jelena Milic, "Putin's Orchestra," *The New Century*, No. 7, May 2014. https://www.ceas-serbia.org/images/Jelena_Milic_Foreword_Putins_Orchestra.pdf

in governance to advantage Russian firms and local allies. The other aims at cultivating relationships with aspiring autocrats and cultivating political parties that serve Russian interests, notably, populists, nationalists, and Eurosceptic groups. The objective is to deepen political divides within countries and across Europe that contribute to instability and impede unified action against Russia.

Until about 2007, Russia acted opportunistically – the emphasis was on expanding its economic presence and control. After 2007, however, Russia’s economic moves appear to be more closely aligned with advancing Russia’s political influence. This follows Putin’s consolidation of power within Russia and his 2007 speech in Munich, which signaled a policy turn. Putin harnessed the natural quest for enrichment to serve state interests.

What success have these efforts achieved? *The Kremlin Playbook* attempts to measure the progress Russia has made toward political and economic capture in five Eastern European states by comparing Russia’s economic footprint (comprising corporate presence, direct investment, trade relationships, and private ownership and other investments) with Russian influence. Countries where “Russia’s economic footprint was on average more than 12 percent of GDP were generally more vulnerable to Russian economic influence and capture.”¹⁸ In Bulgaria, where Russia’s economic presence averaged over 22 percent of the GDP...there were clear signs of both political and economic capture.”¹⁹ Russia’s footprint in Serbia is also above the 12 percent threshold and Russia wields considerable political influence there, but that is also explained by a close historical relationship that goes beyond the economic sphere. Latvia too sees Russia’s economic footprint above the 12 percent threshold, making it vulnerable to economic capture, but it has demonstrated greater resistance to Russian political influence.

Given that much of Russia’s influence derives from its substantial economic presence and the deeply rooted weaknesses of local societies, its effects will

be persistent. It makes no difference whether Russia’s oligarchs now centered on Putin are exploiting Russian policy as a vehicle to advance their own interests abroad or Putin is using alliances between Russian and local oligarchs as an instrument of Russian foreign policy. The two efforts are symbiotic. The fact that so much of Russia’s spread of influence rests upon the accumulation of wealth by local and Russian officials and oligarchs means it is likely to be highly resistant to mere policy changes or attempts at reform. Russian influence means extreme wealth for a few in Russia and Eastern Europe.

Russia views its efforts as defensive. Tactical victories may be achieved, but, in Moscow’s view, the threat posed by Western aggression is ever present. Any activity by the West in Russia’s own presumed sphere of interest is considered hostile. Maintaining the ability to exert economic and political influence therefore requires a continuing effort.

What effects will this have on the EU, NATO, and the United States?

Europe’s current vulnerabilities are not the consequence of Russian meddling; they are, rather, the result of a confluence of internal problems and external developments, many of them relating primarily to the Middle East. Without claiming that the United States is an essential or even determining actor in European matters, America’s more passive role or deliberate distancing from Europe has been correlated with fraying European unity. Whether this is a purely European phenomenon over which the United States has no influence is difficult to say.

The EU is in crisis. Its economic recovery has been slow and uneven after the 2008 global recession. The financial bailout of Greece threatened European unity, and several other European countries still face serious economic problems that could require intervention.

Nationalist and populist sentiments are growing. The massive flow of illegal immigrants and refugees into

¹⁸ *The Kremlin Playbook*, op.cit.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Europe from the Middle East and Africa has divided governments and provoked a backlash. The immigration issue contributed to British voters' decision to leave the EU and governments in other countries to close their borders to further entries. Economic pressure and the continuing conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa guarantee that this will be a continuing problem. The refugee emergency also underscored the EU's difficulties in dealing with crises – the EU works well as long as things are tranquil.

The immigration crisis creates a new vulnerability. Turkey has already used the threat of unleashing more refugees in order to coerce political concessions from the EU and individual member states. Some in Europe fear that Russia will somehow collude with Turkey to let another million refugees storm the EU. Failure to effectively deal with the current and new waves of refugees will further undermine European unity.

The more than a million refugees and illegal immigrants have also heightened immediate and long-term fears of terrorism. Spectacular terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels, and Nice and smaller-scale attacks elsewhere, plus the discovery of numerous terrorist plots, have kept the Continent on edge. Were the thousands of Europeans who went to join jihadist fronts in Syria and Iraq bringing their violent campaigns home? Would Europe be able to assimilate the hundreds of thousands of poorly educated young men coming from violent environments, or would they also be radicalized into new generations of terrorists?

The EU saw disillusion among the newly admitted populations with what they thought they would gain by accession. Joining the EU did not translate into immediate prosperity or the expected benefits of democracy. Many of the Central and Eastern European EU member states have seen deterioration in their democratic institutions – other European states have expressed concerns about authoritarian turns in both Poland and Hungary. Instead of open and prosperous societies, many citizens in former communist states saw hard times and blatant corruption.

Although their GDP per capita have improved, as of 2014, all of the Eastern European countries, including Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia saw larger shares of their populations in poverty than in Russia. This breeds disappointment and anger, especially when it is accompanied by injustice and impunity – it is Putin's audience. Who held power seemed to make little difference; promised reforms were seldom delivered. In contrast, in Putin's Russia, the government is perceived to have tamed the oligarchs to the benefit of the general population, and, of course, Putin.

Europe's problems had little to do with Russia, but, not surprisingly, Russia was able to find a quantum of sympathy among xenophobic nationalists, those left behind in the transition to capitalist economies, and – ironically – those tired of the corruption that Russia now helps to sustain.

Russia's resurgence was not viewed in European capitals as an imminent threat until its intervention in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014. Even now, many in Europe believe that Russia has no incentive to push further west and that the Russian threat is being deliberately inflated solely to increase defense spending and serve other agendas. Russian actions have galvanized but not unified Europe. Instead, they have added another layer to the Continent's existing divisions.

Russia's actions in Ukraine renewed focus on the importance of NATO. Additional NATO units were deployed to the Baltic republics, and military exercises were conducted in Eastern Europe to bolster confidence that any Russian aggression would be countered by the full weight of the alliance. These moves were undercut by the campaign rhetoric of Donald Trump, who complained that “many NATO nations are not making payments, not making what they are supposed to make” and that America's willingness to assist them in an attack would depend on their fulfilling “their obligations to us.”²⁰

²⁰ Ivana Kottasova and Sonam Vashi, “Reality Check: Trump on NATO Countries Paying Their Share,” *CNN.com*, July 27, 2016. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/07/27/politics/donald-trump-nato-allies/>

Trump's complaint that some NATO members have been free riders while the United States has borne a disproportionate share of the defense burden is not a new one. American officials, including both President Bush and President Obama, have for years complained that Europeans were not paying their fair share of the alliance costs.²¹ That the United States might not immediately respond if a NATO ally were attacked was new territory, however, and it caused concern among both American and European officials.

For NATO to serve as a deterrent, potential foes must believe that aggression against any NATO member will bring about an immediate response by the entire alliance. Keeping the enemy guessing only risks miscalculation. At the same time, however, continued reductions in defense spending have sapped NATO's readiness to respond and have eroded its credibility as a military force. Some of the same European political leaders who lamented Trump's comments have seen their own countries, incrementally and in less visible fashion, reduce their commitment to the alliance. A conditional commitment is one way to destroy the purpose of the alliance; enfeebling it to the point of rendering it ineffectual is another.

While America's commitment to its allies remains strong, Trump's comments resonated with a war-fatigued audience who had lived through and fought in America's two longest wars, in Afghanistan and Iraq. These wars cost the United States 10,000 dead, 50,000 wounded, and several trillion dollars. Americans fervently desire to keep out of further foreign wars. Isolationism has deep roots in American history. Tired of the Middle East's endless wars, Americans are wary about U.S. military operations in Syria and Iraq but see them as a necessity to prevent terrorists from coming to the United States.

Despite all this, according to recent public opinion polls, Americans view Russia as a major threat, see NATO as good for the United States, and support military action if Russia attacks a NATO ally.²² However, that level of support has been gradually declining, especially among younger Americans who have no recollection of the Cold War, let alone World War II. A public opinion poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2015 indicated that 56 percent of people polled in the United States (and 53 percent of those polled in Canada) supported U.S. military action by their countries if Russia attacked a NATO ally. But, only in the United States and Canada did support for military action in response to a Russian attack on a NATO ally exceed 50 percent – a majority of people in the European countries surveyed would not support such action.²³ Taken together with declining European military budgets, this could suggest that the United States, which bears the bulk of the defense burden, values NATO more than Europe does, or that Europeans remain more reluctant to confront Russia.

Conversely, only 44 percent of Donald Trump's self-declared supporters see NATO as essential to U.S. foreign policy (in contrast to the 61 percent of the other Republicans in the United States who believe that NATO is essential), and only 34 percent of the Trump supporters see maintaining military alliances as effective.²⁴ It is not clear whether Trump is reflecting or reinforcing these sentiments.

Russia thus finds a distracted and divided Europe, a troubled NATO alliance that has seen its popular support decline, and a newly-elected administration in Washington that is ready to question America's commitment to Europe's defense. This situation will affect strategic calculations in European capitals, especially those of Russia's immediate neighbors, as well as in Moscow. An overt Russian invasion would

²¹ Simond de Galbert, "Are European Countries Really 'Free Riders'?", *The Atlantic*, March 24, 2016. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/obama-doctrine-europe-free-riders/475245/>

²² Bruce Stokes, "Views of NATO and Its Role Are Mixed in U.S., Other Nations," *FactTank*, Pew Research Center, March 28, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/28/views-of-nato-and-its-role-are-mixed-in-u-s-other-member-nations/>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Adam Taylor, "Poll: Trump Supporters See the World Very Differently Than Other Republicans," *The Washington Post*, July 18, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/07/18/poll-trump-supporters-see-the-world-very-differently-than-other-republicans/?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.9259d2a564f4

be risky, but that still leaves ample room for more-insidious maneuvers. It suggests that meeting the Russian challenge will require more than a military buildup.

What can be done?

The travails of the EU, NATO, and the United States were givens, but what has Putin himself actually achieved since his 2007 speech? It is a mixed balance sheet. He has built up Russia's armed forces. He has restored Crimea to Russia. Elsewhere, he is rebuilding the Russian empire by bits, stripping territory from Georgia and Moldova to create three pretend micro-states that depend on Russia to survive and that can be used to destabilize these countries if they adopt an anti-Russian line.

Putin has instigated and supports a continuing armed conflict in Ukraine, which will discourage investment and slow that country's economic development, but as a consequence of his policies there, Russia itself is under economic sanctions and foreign investment has slowed.

NATO enlargement has also slowed, but it would have done so anyway. Georgia and Ukraine are no longer seen as likely candidates for immediate membership. Continuing Russian support for the breakaway republic of Transnistria probably precludes further progress toward Moldova's membership. Montenegro and Macedonia are still moving slowly toward membership.

Russia has increased its political leverage in some Eastern Europe and Balkan countries. NATO members, especially those on Russia's doorstep, have become more apprehensive about Russia, but the threat from Moscow also may have energized the alliance.

Russian military support has guaranteed Syrian President Assad's survival in a reduced sectarian enclave,

along with Russia's access to military bases in Syria and on the Mediterranean Sea, but the insurgency continues. It may take years to regain control of all of Syria and pacify its population, and the Assad regime cannot do that without massive Russian support, if at all. Russia's actions in Syria are not without risk. Its military intervention – in particular, the brutal tactics employed by Syrian and Russian forces – guarantees animosity among the broader Sunni community. It is likely to provoke terrorist attacks on Russian targets. Russian actions in Syria could also intensify the terrorist threat Russia faces from returning Chechen and Dagestani fighters.

Putin's actions abroad reportedly have won him accolades at home, particularly among Russian nationalists, but it is difficult to gauge the true nature of public opinion in Russia. The government controls the media, although not as completely as it did in the pre-Internet age. Glory is easily gained when it costs nothing. A real fight, with Russian casualties abroad, terrorist attacks at home, and economic straits, would erode Putin's popularity. He is smart enough to avoid debacles like the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Much of his visible successes depend on bluff and faits accomplis achieved at little cost. The greater threat comes from Putin's ability to wage war by other means.

A recent RAND study observes that the speed of Russia's intervention in Ukraine and its rapid takeover of Crimea indicate that Russia's strategic planners had previously "identified a deep vulnerability in U.S. and NATO regional policies and capabilities...neither the United States nor its allies had clearly stated policy interests in Ukraine, nor did they present a clear threshold for war if Russia violated Ukraine's sovereignty."²⁵ In Georgia in 2008, Russia also calculated that its rapid invasion would not elicit a high order military response.

Russia's desire to avoid the risks of higher order conflict suggests that raising the risks of Russian inter-

²⁵ Ben Connable, Jason. H. Campbell, and Dan Madden, *Stretching and Exploiting Thresholds for High-Order War: How Russia, China, and Iran Are Eroding American Influence Using Time-Tested Measures Short of War*, Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2016.

vention through carefully calibrated policy declarations reinforced by NATO military deployments could offset to a degree Russia's local military advantages and, more importantly, change risk calculations in Moscow.

Choices for America in a Turbulent World, another recent RAND report, which offers a re-think of American strategy, suggests that, if the next administration chooses to confront Russia, the United States "could seek to further increase the economic, political, and military pressure on Russia" by stepping up "military assistance – including lethal military assistance – to Ukraine and to actively support Ukraine's eventual entry into NATO and the E.U." The United States could also move to bolster the defense of exposed NATO nations, particularly the Baltic states, beyond the rotational deployments of allied forces already agreed upon."²⁶

Providing better weapons, deploying additional forces, expanding the alliance are military options that signal commitment, deter adventurism, and support diplomacy. (The same study explores the pros and cons of engaging with Russia.) The question is how can the United States counter the spread of Russian influence through economic coercion, corruption, and state capture? And is it America's business to intervene in internal matters of sovereign states?

In a series of lectures delivered at the U.S. National War College in 1946 – 1947, George Kennan said that the United States needed "a very, very careful appraisal of the means short of war which this country has at its disposal for meeting the problems it faces today."²⁷ He proceeded to outline a series of psychological, diplomatic, and economic "weapons," and what he considered as "our major political weapon" – the cultivation of solidarity with other like-minded nations – which meant military alliances, but more than that.

Kennan asked aloud whether these measures were enough to get us what we wanted without going to war. He thought that they were, depending on two conditions. The first was that the United States and its allies "keep up at all times a preponderance of strength." It is crucial to note that Kennan saw strength in more than military terms. "Strength goes beyond the armed services to the root of our society... none of us can be indifferent to internal disharmony, dissension, intolerance, and the things that break up the moral and political structure of our society at home."²⁸

Kennan also pointed out that strength "depends for its effectiveness not only on its existence, but on our readiness to use it at any time if we are pushed beyond certain limits....Strength is only a question of having the courage of our convictions and of acting accordingly....What it boils down to...is that for great nations, as for individuals today, there is no real security and there is no alternative to living dangerously."

Kennan's second condition was that "we must select measures and use them not hit-or-miss as the moment may seem to demand, but in accordance with a pattern of grand strategy no less concrete and no less consistent that that which governs our actions in war."

The world has changed dramatically since 1947. A devastated and impoverished Europe, despite its current difficulties, is now an economically powerful union connected through shared values, commerce, and military alliances with the United States and other democratic nations around the world. Nonetheless, Kennan's remarks, although aimed at an American audience, provide a starting point for what should be done.

The first step is to recognize that this is an unavoidable contest, reflecting profound differences in outlooks,

²⁶ James Dobbins, Richard H. Solomon, et. al. *Choices for America in a Turbulent World*, Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2015. See also: Hans Binnendijk, *Friends, Foes, and Future Directions: U.S. Partnerships in a Turbulent World*, Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2016.

²⁷ Giles D. Harlow and George C. Maerz (eds.), *Measures Short of War: The George F. Kennan Lectures at the National War College, 1946-47*, Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1991.

²⁸ Ibid.

values, and methods. Putin's Russia is driven by deep grievance over lost grandeur and historic suspicion of a hostile outside world determined to deprive Russia of its rightful place. Ignoring Russia will not work. Europe cannot pretend that Russia is not a threat, just as Russia will not be persuaded that NATO is not a belligerent force bent upon Russia's ultimate destruction. Nor can Russia's exaggerated sense of self-importance, deeply felt envy, and feelings of persecution be dispelled by a deal.

When looking at Russian leadership today, we are looking at the cult of Putin, to which there is no effective opposition – the Duma and the media are under his control, journalists and activists opposed to the government are killed, Russia's oligarchs survive at Putin's pleasure. At the same time, it is not deterministic to point out that Putin's fears and ambitions are consistent with Russian and Soviet history. Putin has been preparing and pursuing this course for years. It will not be significantly altered as long as he remains in power and, even then, it reflects worldviews shared by government strategists and ordinary Russians to such an extent that it will survive a change in leadership. The Russian challenge will not be satisfied, and it will not go away. We must accept that this will be a long struggle, perhaps equaling in length, but not replicating, the Cold War.

Meeting the challenge does not mean being bellicose, drawing red lines, or issuing threats, which are useless. It means first of all looking inward to define our own values and identify our own strengths and weaknesses. An effective strategy will require figuring out how to best exploit the strengths and reduce the vulnerabilities. I use the word "our" to express the shared values of the Western democracies, which America inherited from the European enlightenment and incorporated into the U.S. Constitution. At the same time, I realize that there will be some differences among people and nations about those values, priorities, and policies. These differences should not be allowed to impede the broader unity of purpose to protect our collective freedom.

Unity of purpose applies not solely to cooperation between Europe and the United States, which is

chronically undermined by a softly expressed but nonetheless corrosive anti-Americanism. The necessity of unity applies also to the nations of Europe, which must strive to define what fundamental values unite those engaged in the European project – an effort that is more than Brussels-dictated regulations. In dealing with Russia, Europe must field a united front.

Unity of purpose also means overcoming the deep partisan divisions that, in my view, pose the greatest threat to American national security and that have produced unprecedented levels of cynicism and contempt for the institutions of the U.S. federal government.

Even after 2007, Putin has been opportunistic but cautious, gaining influence in ways that do not provoke reactions but moving decisively when an opportunity arises as occurred in Ukraine and Syria. Our strategy must seek to do likewise. Europe, NATO, and the United States will not win every encounter, but there will be opportunities to remind Russia that there are costs to aggression, even if they are not incurred immediately. Between those moments, the allies can pursue the continuing task of creating a stronger Western alliance that offers fewer vulnerabilities for Russia to exploit.

The United States and its allies can employ some, but not all, of the tactics and techniques that Putin now uses. Our objectives differ. The West seeks stability; Russia's interests are served by instability. In addition, the West has moral constraints. The United States will kill terrorist commanders when capture is not realistic. It will not assassinate foreign leaders (although it once did so) or eliminate troublesome journalists. Bribes of foreign officials are not unheard of in the West, but they are usually paid by corporations in order to win contracts and not to serve national interests, and they are now less tolerated. The United States and its allies are paying more attention to cyber threats and are increasing their capacity to wage cyber-warfare.

Putin has the advantage of being able to more easily coordinate the military, economic, diplomatic,

propaganda, and psychological levers of power. State companies and dependent Russian oligarchs are at his beck and call. He worries less about public opinion. Messy party politics do not interfere with the implementation of his vision.

Kennan spoke about America's mighty economic power, which was unrivalled at the end of World War II. With the acceleration of globalization and the emergence of truly multinational corporations, however, economic policy in the United States became separated from foreign policy.²⁹ The United States still possesses vast economic strength that can be wielded to achieve national interests, but Washington has allowed its economic instruments, like its manufacturing tools, to rust. A businessman in the White House may bring a better understanding of how economic strength may be used to further national interests.

A similar paradox arises in the theater of information warfare. Through its vast entertainment industry and via the Internet, the United States has immense cultural influence throughout the world – not always positive in the eyes of many, but nonetheless huge. Yet U.S. capabilities to conduct psychological operations, wage political warfare, or even broadcast a cogent national message are feeble and uncoordinated.

The high-volume, multichannel Russian propaganda model will be hard to counter. U.S. public diplomacy is under-performing. "In 2013 then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told Congress that the Broadcasting Board of Governors – which oversees the Voice of America, and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and other surrogate media – is 'practically defunct.'"³⁰ "If the United States is to compete with Russia in this theater, it will have to significantly upgrade its public diplomacy capabilities.

It is unclear how the new administration in Washington will deal with Russia. President-elect Trump has expressed admiration for Putin as a strong leader and has promised to improve relations between the two countries. That may not go down well with either Republicans or Democrats in a Republican-controlled Congress. By a vote of 390 to 30, the U.S. House of Representatives recently passed a bill setting up a new interagency group aimed at stifling Russian attempts to "exert covert influence over peoples and governments."³¹ Supporting legislation was offered in the Senate.

The legislation says that this new committee will be charged with "countering active measures by Russia to exert covert influence, including exposing falsehoods, agents of influence, corruption, human rights abuses, terrorism and assassinations carried out by the security services of political elites of the Russian Federation or their proxies."³² If it had been passed by both houses of Congress, the bill would seem to run directly counter to President-elect Trump's perceptions of how to deal with Russia. However, the Obama administration opposed the initiative on grounds that it would duplicate existing efforts.

My advice to Europeans is to prepare for unpredictability in dealing with the United States – not the good kind that keeps foes guessing, but the kind that baffles allies.

Europeans fear that the United States and Russia will negotiate some sort of new Yalta agreement that divides the Continent into mutually recognized spheres of influence. President-elect Trump boasts of his deal-making skills. But what might such a grand deal between the United States and Russia entail? And would it work any better than President Bush's claim that he looked "the man in the eye...and was

²⁹ This topic is addressed in Robert D. Blackwill and Jennifer M. Harris, *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016.

³⁰ Christopher Paul and William Courtney, "Russian Propaganda is Pervasive, and America Is Behind the Power Curve in Countering It," *U.S. News and World Report*, December 9, 2016. <http://www.rand.org/blog/2016/09/russian-propaganda-is-pervasive-and-america-is-behind.html>

³¹ Christina Marcos, "House passes intelligence bill enhancing efforts against Russia," *The Hill*, November 30, 2016. <http://thehill.com/blogs/floor-action/house/308228-house-passes-intelligence-bill-enhancing-efforts-against-russia>

³² *House Resolution 6393, Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017*, 114th Congress, 2nd Session, November 30, 2016.

able to get a sense of his soul” or President Obama’s attempt to reset Russian-American relations?

Judging by his campaign rhetoric and selection of advisors, the President-elect’s paramount concern is the destruction of the global jihadist terrorist enterprise. In return for Russian cooperation in destroying the Islamic State and other jihadist groups in Syria, the United States might move to soften the economic sanctions that were imposed on Russia after its annexation of Crimea. More ambitiously, the new U.S. president might recognize Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its unique security concerns in return for a Russian promise not to invade exposed NATO countries on Russia’s frontier.

Dividing turf is a long-standing technique for settling disputes, and not only in the Mafia. The problem with such deals is that Russia has little to offer in going after the Islamic State. Its claims to have done so have thus far been shown to be false. Russian bombers aim at other Syrian rebels, those closest to Assad’s bastion, including rebel groups backed by the West. The United States and its allies in Europe and the region are capable of destroying the Islamic State, at least as a territorial entity, without the addition of Russian airpower.

Moreover, given the way in which Syria and Russia have used airpower against civilian targets in places like Aleppo, it would be counterproductive for the United States to be associated with a campaign that has already been described as a war crime.³³ At a minimum, such an association might crack the U.S.-led coalition of nations currently cooperating in the campaign. American cooperation in a ruthless Russian-backed Syrian military campaign would also alienate America’s Arab allies, almost all of whom are Sunni.

Whether the West should abandon its hostility toward the Assad regime or end its alliance with Saudi Arabia

are major policy questions that should be addressed, but a promise of Russian cooperation adds little to Assad’s appeal. Any promise by Russia not to invade NATO members would have to be heavily discounted. Anyway, such measures miss the larger, less-visible challenge of growing Russian influence. Europe will be safer when there are fewer political, economic, cultural, and ethnic fissures for Russia to exploit.

The problem with a businessman’s approach to diplomacy is that it is transaction-oriented, while alliances are relationships that require continued attention and reinforcement. Contracts between foreign adversaries are not cash deals. They require continued vigilance, enforcement mechanisms, and penalties for noncompliance, and these, in turn, require strength and determination. This is the position taken both by the U.S. Congress and the incoming administration on the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). It would seem that what is true for the Iran agreement would be true for any deal between Trump and Putin.

President-elect Trump has called NATO’s utility into question. That has adverse consequences but should be treated as a challenge. Unless they are confident that Europe can be defended without U.S. assistance, NATO’s European members are going to have to step up and make the case for the alliance – they will find allies in the United States equally committed to NATO. Judging by his past statements, this includes the newly-nominated Secretary of Defense.

In 2002, NATO members set a goal of spending 2 percent of their GDP on defense. Apart from the United States, only four have achieved that goal (Greece, the United Kingdom, Estonia, and Poland, and Greece achieved this feat only because of the sharp fall in its GDP).³⁴ It is becoming more difficult for NATO members to achieve this overall goal. Some of the countries’ defense budgets would be unable

³³ For a discussion of Syria’s and Russia’s military campaign in Syria, see Brian Michael Jenkins, *How the Current Conflicts Are Shaping the Future of Syria and Iraq*, Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2015, and; “What the Battles of Mosul and Aleppo Tell Us about Their Countries’ Futures,” *The Hill*, November 14, 2016. <http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/defense/305881-what-the-battles-of-mosul-and-aleppo-tell-us-about-their-countries>

³⁴ Kottasova, “Reality Check: Trump on NATO Countries Paying Their Share,” *op.cit.* According to the World Bank, UK defense spending in 2015 was 1.9 percent. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS>

to absorb that large an increase – it would lead to waste. During the Cold War, when a number of the larger NATO members maintained large military establishments, local defense industries could meet demand, and increased expenditures led to increased capability. Since then, some defense industries have shrunk below a critical mass and simply can no longer efficiently respond to a significantly increased expenditure. Acquisitions would make sense only in the context of the alliance as a whole.³⁵ That suggests that NATO has become less an alliance of national armed forces and even more an integrated force, accelerating a trend already taking place, which means that the 2 percent benchmark should not be the sole criterion of commitment.

NATO member governments must address how much each nation needs to spend and how to allocate defense budgets in ways that make sense and truly strengthen the alliance. That is a complicated military and political undertaking, with discussions extending NATO's already long planning horizons. The process itself can easily become an excuse for inaction, which would further undermine the utility of the alliance in the eyes of the United States and its credibility in Moscow. Other ways could be found to more quickly strengthen the alliance, thereby sending a strong signal of commitment. These might include an internal military assistance program in which wealthier NATO members agree to contribute to NATO-approved improvements in other countries. Such contributions would be immediate one-off expenditures. For example, a group of NATO members might agree to pay for new aircraft to upgrade the air defenses of front-line members that are less able to increase their defense budgets. Bulgaria, which is in the process of acquiring F-16 aircraft, is a case in point.

Ukraine represents a unique challenge to both Russia and the west. For historical, religious, and cultural reasons, Russia views Ukraine differently from the other former Soviet republics and will not accept its membership in NATO, which under

current circumstances is off the table anyway. The country could remain indefinitely in a state of low-level war between a small Russian-dominated and dependent enclave in the east and a pro-West, but corrupt and ineffectual government in Kiev, which renewed popular protest, could topple. A theoretical third possibility is the emergence of an independent Ukraine, able to command the allegiance of its citizens who, during the 2014 Euromaidan demonstrations, exhibited a strong sense of national identity and resistance to Russian domination. Without being a member of NATO, Ukraine would have to harness that popular will enough to deter further Russian encroachment by promising a fierce resistance. In any case, Russia, with approximately 150 million people, may be reluctant to assume the political challenge and economic burden of pacifying and supporting more than 40 million Ukrainians.

Creating a less corrupt, fully functional government and economy necessary to support a democratic garrison state on Russia's doorstep is a long-haul proposition, one far from today's shaky reality. Ukrainians have already suffered significantly for standing up to Russia. Since 2014, thousands have been killed in the continuing conflict between government forces and Russian-backed formations, a large portion of Ukraine's industrial base has been lost, inflation has risen, and living standards have declined. At the moment, President Poroshenko can barely hold the disillusioned and politically divided country together. Further scandals will alienate its people. The West can assist Ukraine economically, but that assistance must be conditioned on reforms that mitigate suffering and win popular support. On the other hand, attempting to impose standards for reform that fail to recognize local realities, can also be counterproductive. Getting it right requires detailed local knowledge and targeted actions, not artificial criteria.

The former Eastern Bloc nations, which remain most vulnerable, will need external assistance to counter Russian influence. This entails far more than

³⁵ Christian Molling, "NATO's Two Percent Illusion: Germany Needs to Create Greater Efficiency Within the Alliance," *SWP Comments*, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, August 2014, https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2014C36_mlg.pdf

deploying additional battalions to deter a Russian invasion, which may be the least likely scenario. Corruption is one of Putin's most important allies. Too many ostensibly pro-EU politicians in the East are seen as corrupt. New EU members in the Balkans and Eastern Europe do not need more lectures on rule of law and transparency. They need trained investigators and prosecutors who know how to legally gather and effectively present evidence in court and judges willing to try cases on the merits. To date, the record is poor, owing in part to control of the state security services by oligarchs and corrupt politicians and corruption in the police and judicial system. While focusing on lower level corruption, the more serious threat of state capture has been left largely unattended. EU members are themselves divided on this issue.

Reluctant to interfere in the internal affairs of other EU members, especially in intelligence and law enforcement, which remain bastions of national sovereignty, and beset by members' own corruption scandals, the EU has been timid about tackling corruption in its newest entrants. It has treated accession to the EU as the finish line, when in fact it is just the beginning of what will be a long effort to develop the institutional capabilities to contain institutionalized corruption. The difference between corruption in "old Europe" and corruption on the Eastern frontiers is the fragility of the latter's state institutions. Political will cannot be exported, but the EU can make combating major corruption – not petty bribes to traffic police – a priority dictated by security concerns.

The EU can more vigorously support reform efforts, just as Russia and its oligarch allies seek to stifle them. In not doing so, the EU is seen as hypocritical about fighting corruption while continuing to do business with local oligarchs while Putin, despite his own acquisition of vast wealth, can claim to have attacked corrupt oligarchs. The EU can provide more technical assistance and can even provide investigative help. And EU members can, on their own, expose and sanction the most egregious offenders. Again, this requires precision targeting rather than making impossible demands.

The United States could choose to adopt a passive policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. This would be contrary to past practice. The United States historically has championed free elections, freedom of the press, human rights, civil liberties, diversity, gender equality, protection of minorities, free trade, good governance, and anticorruption. The catalogue of desiderata, while noble, can sometimes obscure the harder requirements of national security as well as national interest. The trickier question is whether the United States and the EU can combat corruption and state capture without destabilizing fragile governments or provoking a backlash that propels governments out of the European Union and NATO.

The United States has tended to neglect Eastern Europe, in particular the Balkans. In part, this reflected a conscious policy decision by the Bush administration to distance itself from President Clinton's military interventions in the region. U.S. policy also reflected deference to Europe. Once former bloc countries were admitted to NATO, their further political and economic progress was left to the EU while events elsewhere – 9/11, the military campaign in Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq, the political turmoil that followed the Arab Spring – commanded U.S. attention.

In the eyes of local leaders, American diplomats in the region became passive spectators rather than active participants, while restrictions imposed by Congress and an increasingly bureaucratic State Department impeded responses to the simplest requests for assistance in the areas of defense, law enforcement, and criminal justice.

The United States can look for ways to encourage greater foreign investment, and protect investors against local predators, it can back local entrepreneurs, and it can use its own intelligence resources and the expertise it has gained in investigating financial crimes, money laundering, and terrorist financing worldwide to quietly provide investigative assistance in nailing local offenders. The United States can also, more easily than the EU, expose wrongdoers and impose its own penalties.

This is a matter not of soaring pronouncements or international summits, but rather of mobilizing for the close combat of strategic competition. Successfully helping allies defend themselves, build local capacity, resist Russian subversion, and reduce the corruption that facilitates it will require detailed local knowledge and case-by-case decisions, which is what embassies do.

But is it doable? Can the United States and its European allies today muster the determination and maintain unity necessary for a long strategic contest with Russia? Can the United States, which tends to compartmentalize instead of orchestrate its diplomatic, military, and economic instruments wage an effective campaign that relies on measures short of war? Can NATO, a military alliance, expand its concept of the battlefield to wage a foggier kind of war?

The fact that the Russians think they are learning lessons from Western actions in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Georgia, Ukraine and Syria suggests that the United States has capabilities that worry Moscow, although the Russians may see them as more directed and coordinated than Washington might or reality allows. And NATO's experience of the last fifteen years in dealing with terrorist adversaries may have usefully broadened its notions of warfare. Looking back at the Cold War, this is not entirely new territory.

Looking ahead, several scenarios seem possible. Distracted by economic challenges, immigration issues, and populist revolts, and divided on how to deal with Russia, Europe could flounder while the United States turns away from Europe to address its own concerns. This would leave Russia with a free hand to increase its influence in the surrounding states and further abroad. Indeed, weakness could fuel President Putin's ambitions and encourage even more aggressive behavior.

More optimistically, Europe and the United States will muster the will and take measures to counter or at least constrain Russia's revanchist venture. This would require not merely a renewal of commitment to the Western military alliance, but a fundamental re-formulation of EU and U.S. political strategy.

Alternatively, the Western allies and Russia conceivably could achieve through dialogue some kind of constructive *modus vivendi* whereby Russia becomes a healthier, less paranoid power that respects the independence of its former empire. Some would go further, arguing that engaging Russia is natural and necessary to deal with the threats of Islamic extremism and or potential aggression by China. Such a rapprochement would seem to be a long shot, based more on hope than a realistic assessment of the situation, and it is less achievable if Europe and the United States appear disorganized and vulnerable.