

## THE RETURN OF GLOBAL RUSSIA: AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

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Since 2012, Russia has been conducting a sophisticated, well-resourced, and, thus far, successful campaign to expand its global influence at the expense of the United States and other Western countries. Moscow has pursued a host of objectives, such as tarnishing democracy and undermining the U.S.-led liberal international order, especially in places of traditional U.S. influence; dividing Western political and security institutions; demonstrating Russia's return as a global superpower; bolstering Vladimir Putin's domestic legitimacy; and promoting Russian commercial, military, and energy interests.

Though its foreign actions are often opportunistic, Russia increasingly aims to create a multipolar world in which it plays a more prominent role. Moscow's national security establishment broadly supports this international outreach, which will likely remain an enduring feature of Russian foreign policy. Washington and its allies must carefully judge Russian actions case by case and respond in concert when possible.

### The Kremlin's International Agenda

- Moscow has relied on relatively inexpensive diplomatic, military, intelligence, cyber, trade, energy, and financial tools to wield influence and expand its global footprint.
- The Kremlin has capitalized on Western missteps and growing anti-establishment sentiments in Europe and North America.
- Russia will likely continue trying to fill global power vacuums resulting from U.S. President Donald Trump's "America First" foreign policy.

### Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy

Formulating an effective response to Russia's global activism will be challenging. To do so, U.S. policymakers should consider four broad points:

- **Ask the first-order question.** How do Russia's actions affect U.S. interests and foreign policy goals? In some areas, Russian activities have damaged U.S. interests, but elsewhere their impact has been symbolic rather than substantive. Russian activity should not be conflated with Russian success.
- **Weigh costs and benefits.** Russia's approach has had mixed results. Its investments in the Middle East have paid off handsomely. But in Europe, Russian actions have mobilized Western governments to counter them. Notably, Moscow has fewer resources than the West, serious domestic problems, and no real allies.
- **Avoid overreacting.** Not every instance of Russian activism threatens the U.S.-led international order or U.S. security. At a minimum, Washington and its allies should expose Moscow's tactics. More robust responses are justified when important U.S. and allied interests are threatened—and when Washington has realistic, sustainable means to thwart Moscow's ambitions without exacerbating the situation.
- **Leverage partnerships and eschew a one-size-fits-all approach.** There is no cookie-cutter solution for countering Russian adventurism. Washington need not bear this burden alone; it should develop tailored strategies with other actors to deter, contain, and, if necessary, roll back Russian influence operations.

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