

## RUSSIA AND THE WEST IN A NEW STANDOFF

EUGENE RUMER

Writing in 2016 in the leading Russian foreign affairs journal *Russia in Global Affairs*, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov argued that the West had always been a source of existential threat to Russia in a way that the East had never been.<sup>1</sup> Western Europe, Lavrov wrote, had always tried to impose its will and way of life on Russia and deny the Russian people their identity. By comparison, the Mongols—the Golden Horde—were on the whole tolerant and did not deny Russia the right to have its own faith and determine its own fate.

Lavrov's article, published two years after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, which marked a major turning point in the evolution of post-Cold War European security, was symbolic of Moscow's strategic choice in favor of confrontation with the United States; major European powers such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom; and two principal European political and security institutions—the EU and NATO. Russian actions came as a shock to governments on both sides of the Atlantic, but these choices had deep roots in Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet history.

The idea of European security built on shared values, which emerged after 1989 and was enshrined in the 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe, was never accepted by Russian leaders.<sup>2</sup> The rejection of that idea became increasingly pronounced as Russian domestic affairs moved away from those values. In Lavrov's interpretation, the West's pursuit of a values-based European security system was just the latest in a long series of attempts by the West to impose on Russia values that are alien to it.<sup>3</sup> The Poles in the seventeenth

century, Napoleon in the nineteenth century, and Hitler's Germany in the twentieth century tried to do that. They failed. Others, he made clear, would fail too.

This is not to say, Lavrov stressed, that Russia would turn away from Europe. On the contrary, Russia has been an integral part of Europe for many centuries, and this is not going to change. Russia has no intention of being an outsider in European politics, to be relegated to the continent's periphery. Attempts to unite Europe without including Russia have always failed. Only when Russia has a seat at the European table—on its own terms—can the continent be at peace.

The strident nature of this discourse is indicative of the nature of the break between Russia and Europe. From the perspective of the Russian elite, the threat Europe poses, whether intentional or not, is existential. A security arrangement for the continent based on shared values cannot be acceptable to a country that does not share those values and whose ruling elite finds those values to pose an existential threat to its

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Eugene Rumer** is a senior fellow and the director of Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program.

well-being and its hold on power. This, in turn, suggests that the break between Russia and Europe is not a passing phase, but a serious, long-term condition that will shape the course of European security for the foreseeable future.

## A FOREIGN POLICY WITH DOMESTIC GOALS

In Russia, as in many other countries, foreign policy is the near-exclusive preserve of a small elite. For the population at large, many issues on the country's foreign policy and national security agendas may often seem abstract and have relatively little bearing on people's day-to-day lives and activities. This is true in Russia for several reasons, including the economic difficulties and other challenges facing many Russians trying to make ends meet.<sup>4</sup> The absence of threats that would pose immediate danger to the physical safety and well-being of many citizens, such as a war or frequent terrorist incidents, means that national security matters slide on the list of public priorities. Perhaps most importantly, the government's near-total control of major media outlets that deliver information to the majority of the public, and therefore the state's ability to shape such narratives, enables it to subordinate foreign policy to its domestic political objectives.

Russia's ruling elite emerged and became established in the early 1990s, and despite many outward changes since then, its internal structure has changed little, if at all.<sup>5</sup> An oligarchy controls the country's economy (or at least its critical assets), domestic politics, and foreign policy. The elite does not share modern Europe's founding values, internal arrangements, or foreign policy. To accept those values—including the rule of law, transparency, democratic governance, respect for basic freedoms and human rights, and noninterference in the affairs of neighbors—would be tantamount to inviting change that would put an end to oligarchic rule in Russia.

By the same token, various economic undertakings intended to modernize the Russian economy and broaden the country's ties to Europe would threaten the ruling elite's hold on power and would have considerable effect on the Russian economy. Much has been said and written about the need for the Russian economy to modernize and diversify,<sup>6</sup> as its heavy dependence on the extractive sector poses a threat to

its long-term sustainable development.<sup>7</sup> With key sectors of the Russian economy—especially oil and gas—directly or indirectly in the hands of a small number of Kremlin-approved and -supported businessmen or state-controlled corporations, diversification would dilute their economic power and threaten their hold on political power. The opening of the Russian economy to new investment, both foreign and domestic, outside a carefully controlled handful of sectors and the removal of barriers to competition would erode the ruling elite's hold on power.<sup>8</sup>

Paradoxically enough, the break with Europe and the increasingly antagonistic relationship that has developed in recent years, especially since the annexation of Crimea, serve the interests of Russia's ruling elite and reinforce its domestic political position even in the face of considerable economic difficulties. Europe is, after all, a source of many threats to Russia. These threats—according to Russian official propaganda—are multifaceted and include values that are alien to traditional Russian culture; undercut Russian sovereignty by insisting that Russia submit to international legal bodies; and undermine Russian domestic stability and political order by promoting color revolutions around Russia and subversive opposition movements inside the country. Europe also threatens Russian security via an expanded NATO and the deployment of forces within a short distance of Russia's borders and major population centers such as Saint Petersburg. Russia's economic difficulties too are Europe's fault, as they are caused by EU sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea.

Such antagonism toward Europe did not emerge suddenly. It had been building up since the early 1990s. For much of a quarter century, Russian elites were in no position to take decisive action against Europe, but some signs appeared as Russia recovered from the turmoil of the 1990s: the speech by Russian President Vladimir Putin at the 2007 Munich Security Conference,<sup>9</sup> described by some in the audience as “confrontational” and reminiscent of “the cold war,”<sup>10</sup> and the war with Georgia in 2008. Official propaganda painted both events as signs of Russia recovering its greatness and resuming its rightful place in the international system—themes that the ruling elite has relied on repeatedly as tools for legitimizing itself.

A critical break in Russia's relations with Europe occurred in the wake of the large-scale anti-Putin protests of 2011–2012. Tensions between Russia and Europe rose as a result of European criticism of Russian handling of the protests and shortcomings in the election that returned Putin to the presidency.<sup>11</sup> Europe's criticism was a clear sign of its disapproval of Russia's domestic political arrangements under Putin, who embraced increasingly antiliberal values and imposed ever-tighter restrictions on civil society.

An even more damaging blow to Europe's relationship with Russia, which finally put an end to the post–Cold War order in European security, was caused by the Russian intervention in Crimea and Europe's response to it. To Russia's elite, the European reaction sent a clear signal that Europe would not accept Russian claims to a sphere of influence and would insist on extending its values-based security system right up to Russia's border. To Europe, Russian actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine signaled Russia's rejection of that system.

By 2014, Russia had recovered the will and the means to oppose that system across a broad spectrum of activities. Moreover, an active policy of opposition to and counteroffensive against what the Russian elite saw as a threat to its well-being would be an essential element of Russian domestic security and stability. Protecting Russia against this multifaceted threat from the West would become one of the key pillars of legitimacy of the ruling elite, along with its growing dynamism and reassertion of its role as a great power on the world stage.

### **A CALCULATED RISK, BUT STILL A RISK**

Since 2014, the Kremlin's confrontation with Europe has matched and, at times, even exceeded some of the most troubling episodes of the Cold War. The Kremlin's commitment to the confrontation has been reflected in the risks it has been willing to take—calculated, but risks nonetheless.

The annexation of Crimea and the undeclared war in Ukraine have now become essential elements of the European security landscape. What is lost at times, three years on, is that Russian aggression against Ukraine blew up not only

the post–Cold War security order in Europe but also the post–World War II security order. The outright annexation of Crimea by Russia was without precedent in European history since the end of World War II. The political consequences of such a move and the fundamental break in relations with the West that would ensue must have been clear to the Kremlin as the price it would have to pay.

Moreover, although there was only a small risk of a military confrontation with NATO, because Ukraine was not a member of the alliance and therefore not protected by its Article 5 security guarantee, there was a risk of escalation that Russian leaders had to factor into their decisionmaking. The United States and others—including Russia—had given Ukraine security assurances in 1994 in exchange for its agreement to give up Soviet nuclear weapons deployed on its territory.<sup>12</sup> While not a legally binding security guarantee, the arrangement was nonetheless a commitment to the security of Ukraine. The risk of escalation was small but could not be ruled out with certainty—something that Putin may have indirectly confirmed when he claimed that he was prepared to put his nuclear forces on alert to demonstrate the seriousness of Russia's commitment and to deter Western interference in the Crimea crisis.<sup>13</sup>

Although Russian leaders must have judged the risk of a direct military confrontation with NATO to be low, they probably realized that there would be some form of military response from NATO. Specifically, the alliance would withdraw its earlier commitment not to deploy major combat forces on the territories of new members.<sup>14</sup> Russian leaders were probably also aware that new NATO forces would be deployed along the Russian border with the most vulnerable allies—the three Baltic states. Further, they must have realized that all discussions about accommodating Russian objections to the deployment of NATO missile defenses in Europe would cease. Overall, Russian leaders must have known that their move into Ukraine would erase all remaining vestiges of security cooperation with NATO and usher in a fundamentally new phase in European security.

Once the Kremlin discounted the likelihood of a military confrontation with the West over Ukraine, it still had to factor in the economic burden it would have to bear as a

result of its actions. That burden would be twofold: first, it would consist of the almost-certain sanctions that the Kremlin must have known would follow as the West's favorite instrument in its foreign policy tool kit; second, there would be the costs associated with the annexation, to say nothing of the costs of the undeclared war in eastern Ukraine. For an economy that even before the drop in the price of oil in 2014 was slowing to a crawl, this was a nontrivial burden.

There were also the military risks associated with the undeclared war in eastern Ukraine. The early Russian plans for the intervention there apparently called for an expansive unconventional campaign well beyond the Donetsk and Luhansk regions,<sup>15</sup> intended to spark a wider pro-Russian insurgency.<sup>16</sup> In that case, the Russian military should have been prepared to intervene in support of the insurgency—posing the risk of an open counterinsurgency campaign in a large area of Ukraine involving insurgents on both sides and the Ukrainian military.

Beyond the risk of a counterinsurgency campaign, there was the possibility of a full-scale war with Ukraine as a result of Russian aggression in the eastern part of the country.<sup>17</sup> The Kremlin could probably count on the Russian military to prevail in a conventional campaign against the Ukrainian military. However, such a campaign would no doubt be more costly and carry greater risks—of more casualties and even domestic political backlash against the Kremlin—because Moscow could not be sure how the Russian public would react to an outright war with Ukraine, which Russian propagandists have described as practically the same nation as Russia.

In sum, the Kremlin's decision to intervene in Crimea may have been made in a hurry to respond to the collapse of the government of former president Viktor Yanukovich in Kyiv. But it must have been a calculated decision nonetheless, made after the associated risks had been weighed. The fact that the Kremlin has not backtracked from that decision and has stayed the course despite the costs—economic, political, and military—is further evidence of Moscow's resolve and commitment to this course over the long run.

## COLD WAR, TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY STYLE

In keeping with Lavrov's historical analysis of the existential challenge to Russia posed by the West, the Kremlin has responded accordingly. Its response has spanned multiple domains and has been backed by resources and determination to sustain the confrontation over the long term.

Beyond the annexation of Crimea and the undeclared war in eastern Ukraine—in which the Russian military has taken an active role in addition to its support for the irregular separatist units—Moscow's posture has included stepped-up activities in the air, on land, and at sea to deliberately create an atmosphere of tension along its line of contact with NATO. Such activities have included Russian aircraft buzzing U.S. ships in international waters in the Baltic Sea; intercepts of U.S. reconnaissance aircraft in international airspace over the Black Sea<sup>18</sup>; violations of neighboring countries' airspaces<sup>19</sup>; deliberate close calls with civilian airliners; deployment of troops near the border with the Baltic states<sup>20</sup>; and the staging of provocative maneuvers.<sup>21</sup> The repeated nature of these activities, despite NATO leaders' protestations and attempts to engage Russian civilian and military leaders in a dialogue about reducing tensions along the line of contact, suggests that they are not accidental but deliberate and part of the overall Russian game plan for the European theater.

In addition to creating a tense atmosphere, the Kremlin has relied on its nuclear arsenal to intimidate European publics and undermine support for and confidence in NATO. Russian officials have threatened nuclear strikes against NATO member states if they participate in NATO missile-defense deployment.<sup>22</sup> Russia has also deployed nuclear-capable missiles to Kaliningrad and violated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.<sup>23</sup> This campaign of intimidation is reminiscent of the early 1980s Soviet campaign in Europe to prevent NATO from deploying intermediate-range nuclear forces in response to the Soviet deployment and to undermine the cohesion of the alliance.

Despite this deliberate and sustained saber rattling, the Kremlin appears to have chosen a carefully calculated

posture with respect to the military risks it has and has not been willing to accept. The actual use of military force by Russia has been limited to two non-NATO members: Ukraine and Georgia. That Russian leaders view NATO's Article 5 security guarantee seriously has been reflected in their determination to prevent Georgia and Ukraine from obtaining that guarantee. No NATO member state has yet come under direct military attack, which would clearly trigger a military response from the alliance. This suggests that notwithstanding its resolve to oppose NATO and wage a sustained campaign against it by a variety of means, the Kremlin is not prepared for a military confrontation, because it recognizes the danger of catastrophic consequences from pursuing such a course.

Instead, the Kremlin has relied on a diverse tool kit of powerful instruments designed to undermine the alliance. One of the advantages of that tool kit is that the damage to the alliance from those instruments at the hands of the Kremlin and its retainers is ambiguous or falls well short of a direct attack that would trigger the Article 5 guarantee, so the alliance has struggled to develop an effective defense, deterrent, and response. Moscow's available instruments include cyberattacks against government and private-sector interests<sup>24</sup>; information and disinformation campaigns intended to undermine and/or discredit the democratic political order<sup>25</sup>; support for fringe political elements<sup>26</sup>; and outright support and financial backing for political movements considered friendly to the Kremlin and opposed to the liberal international order.<sup>27</sup>

Little of this is new: most, if not all, of these instruments of Russian foreign policy were used during the Cold War. Some of the technology is new—including the use of cybertools, the ubiquity of the cyber domain, and the ensuing vulnerability to hostile cyber penetrations and their various forms of exploitation, ranging from the theft of confidential information to attacks on critical elements of national infrastructure. However, the use of new technology does not fundamentally change the Kremlin's long-standing practice of resorting to so-called active measures.<sup>28</sup> The novelty of the situation is largely that a quarter century has passed since the end of the Cold War, during which the prevailing assumption

of Western policy toward Russia—and not only toward Russia—was that the Cold War and active measures had been relegated to the past. The three years since the annexation of Crimea have proved that assumption wrong.

## NEW OLD CHALLENGES

The proposition that Europe and the West in general are in a new cold war with Russia has been dismissed on the grounds that the new confrontation does not have the same pervasive ideological and global quality as the Cold War. Russia, it is argued, does not pose the same military threat as the Soviet Union did, and even since the country recovered from the turmoil of the 1990s, it has occupied a much smaller place on the world stage because of its own limited capabilities and the rise of other powers. Most, but not all, of these arguments are true; despite many differences, Russia continues to pose a major challenge to Europe and the West in general.

The peaceful finish to the Cold War marked not only the end of a half century of confrontation between Russia and the West but also the beginning of a new phase, in which the West would occupy a position of unchallenged—in every respect—superiority in global affairs. Economically, militarily, and ideologically, the United States and Europe were without peer. Russia had lost the Cold War and was struggling to overcome its multiple domestic crises. China had not yet risen to its current prominence. No other power was in a position to challenge the supremacy and rule-making capacity of the United States and Europe on the global stage and their role as enforcers of those rules.

The September 11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent attacks in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005 were tragic demonstrations of the dark side of globalization. But they did not threaten the economic, military, or ideological supremacy of the United States and Europe, and they did not pose an existential threat. On the contrary, they reinforced the firmly held belief on both sides of the Atlantic that the deficit of democracy and values in the Middle East was the root cause of those attacks and of transnational jihadism, and that the answer should be the propagation of those values in this region.

Russia's return to the world stage as a key actor, however, was different. It coincided with a crisis of the West itself—an existential crisis in the EU and a major political crisis in the United States. The causes of these twin crises are complex, will be debated and analyzed for a long time, and are beyond the scope of this article. In Europe, these causes include the combined effects of the 2008 economic crisis, inflows of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, the rise of populist nationalism and centrifugal pressures in the EU, and the UK's June 2016 vote to leave the EU. In the United States, these factors include the socioeconomic dislocation caused by the economic challenges facing the middle class, side effects of trade liberalization, and other consequences of globalization.

None of these problems facing Europe and the United States has been caused by Russia. However, Moscow has exploited them to assert itself on the world stage at the expense of the United States and Europe, whose values-based policies Russian leaders have treated as an existential threat to their country's domestic political order.

In the United States, the electorate's frustration with establishment candidates of both major political parties during the 2016 presidential election had nothing to do with Russia. But the Kremlin used the theft and public release of unflattering information about the inner workings of the Democratic Party and its candidate, Hillary Clinton—who has long been critical of the Kremlin and accused by its spokesmen and Putin personally of undermining the political order in Russia<sup>29</sup>—to discredit the electoral process in the United States and undermine the public's confidence in its political system.<sup>30</sup> Russian interference in the U.S. election has had a traumatic effect on U.S. domestic politics and contributed to a major political crisis in the United States, the likes of which the country has not seen in nearly half a century. This crisis has had a debilitating effect on policymaking in the United States, both in domestic and international affairs.

One of the most visible consequences of the 2016 election has been U.S. President Donald Trump's radically new approach to NATO. For nearly three-quarters of a century, the United States was the pillar and leader of the alliance. It led the

allies through the Cold War and through NATO's post-Cold War expansion. Successive U.S. administrations urged European allies to shoulder a greater share of their common defense burden. Yet no previous U.S. head of state so bluntly portrayed NATO as a pay-to-play security structure—let alone questioned the value the United States derives from the alliance. Since its inception, NATO has served as the critical transatlantic link for promoting U.S. leadership and supporting the alliance system, which is a critical pillar of the international liberal order.

The Trump administration has changed that. The president and his senior advisers have repeatedly raised doubts about the United States' commitment to the alliance, to the security of Europe, and to the international liberal order. These actions have caused a crisis in NATO and in transatlantic relations. With little apparent caution or forethought, the new U.S. administration has accomplished a major, long-standing goal that Russian and Soviet policy had pursued for decades without much success: to undermine the cohesion of NATO and the transatlantic link. Notwithstanding repeated attempts by key members of his national security team to undo the damage, Trump's frequent assertions that Germany and other allies owe "vast sums of money" raise inescapable questions about the alliance's long-term future and the viability of U.S. security guarantees under Article 5.<sup>31</sup>

All of this occurs against the backdrop of a new security environment in Europe. For a quarter century after the end of the Cold War, most key U.S. and European policymakers believed that the idea of a hot war on the continent had been banished to the past. This is no longer the case. The combination of Russia's vastly improved military capabilities and provocative posture along the line of contact with NATO has forced the alliance to focus on a mission that had long been relegated to the margins of its agenda—deterrence and defense of its members against Russian aggression, which has once again emerged as a real threat. The crisis in the alliance could not have come at a more untimely moment.

The year 2016 was an important milestone in Russia's relations with Europe and the United States. Previously, Russian activities largely entailed protecting Moscow's sphere of influence against European and U.S. encroachment.

The war with Georgia in 2008 and the war against Ukraine beginning in 2014 were fought by Russia to keep these two neighbors in its orbit, and to prevent them from moving toward Europe and the United States. But in 2016, the Kremlin went on the offensive and took the action to its adversaries' turf—to Europe and the United States.

From the Kremlin's perspective, 2016 must have been seen as a highly successful year. Russian interference in the U.S. election plunged American domestic politics into a major crisis. Europe is seized with the specter of the Russian threat.<sup>32</sup> The future of NATO is in doubt, as Washington questions the value of the alliance. In France, the Russian-backed candidate did not win the presidency; but although she lost the vote by a two-to-one margin, the election was a nail-biter, and she is no longer a fringe element in French domestic politics.<sup>33</sup> Emboldened by this success, the Kremlin appears poised to remain on the offensive and keep taking the fight to its adversaries.

## AMBITIONS FAR AND WIDE

The Cold War's battleground was not limited to Europe. The confrontation between Russia and the West took place across different continents. At the end of the Cold War, unable to sustain costly commitments and struggling with multiple domestic crises, Russia withdrew from those old Cold War battlefields. For most of the past decade and a half, as the country has regained its capabilities and ambitions as a major power, its focus has been on restoring and consolidating its influence over its immediate neighbors and defending that turf against encroachment by Europe and the United States. However, Russian activities in the past few years, especially since the break with the West in 2014, suggest a much wider geographic scope to the Kremlin's ambitions to regain at least some measure of its former influence.

The key milestone in Russia's posture beyond its immediate neighborhood was its 2015 direct intervention in Syria. Prior to that point, Russian support for the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had manifested itself mostly in diplomatic interventions on behalf of Assad, financial backing, and the delivery of weapons and equipment, as well

as intelligence sharing. The deployment of Russian aircraft and supporting personnel to an air base in Syria and Russian airstrikes in support of the Syrian army were seen as risky moves by Russia,<sup>34</sup> whose presence in the Middle East had ceased to be a major factor decades ago.<sup>35</sup>

However, the intervention has been a major success for the Kremlin.<sup>36</sup> It has demonstrated the Russian military's ability to project power beyond the country's periphery and sustain a complicated operation over the long term. It has been decisive in changing the fortunes of Syria's civil war and preventing the Assad government from collapsing. It has reinserted Russia as a major military presence in the Middle East, where previously the United States had been the dominant military actor. And it has sent a loud and clear message to the Middle East that Russia—unlike the United States—stands by its clients. The Russian campaign reportedly has also been conducted without incurring major financial or human costs.<sup>37</sup>

The intervention in Syria has been the most visible manifestation of Russia's new global activism. But it has not been the only one. Russian actions—diplomatic, military, covert, and economic—in different parts of the world point to growing ambitions. These ambitions are apparently fueled at least in part by the success of the Syrian intervention and a perception of openings elsewhere.

Recent Russian activities are indicative of where the Kremlin sees opportunities for projecting its power and influence. In Libya, Moscow has engaged with the head of the UN-backed government, Fayeze al-Sarraj,<sup>38</sup> as well as General Khalifa Haftar, a prominent warlord.<sup>39</sup> Both have visited Moscow. Haftar was hosted on board the Russian aircraft carrier *Kuznetsov* in January 2017 and was rumored to have signed a \$2 billion arms deal with Russia.<sup>40</sup> In March, Russian special forces were reportedly deployed in western Egypt near the border with Libya in support of Haftar.<sup>41</sup>

Aside from expanding Russia's footprint around the Mediterranean and exploring commercial opportunities associated with Libyan oil reserves, Libya has special significance for Putin, who was highly critical of Europe and the United States for intervening in Libya and overthrowing

former strongman Muammar Qaddafi. Russia did not formally oppose the intervention in the UN Security Council (UNSC), which occurred during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, and which—the Kremlin has charged—was conducted in violation of the UNSC mandate. The United States and Europe, according to Moscow, carried out regime change in Libya and then irresponsibly left the country in chaos.<sup>42</sup>

In the Western Balkans, Russia has engaged in a variety of activities—diplomatic, economic, disinformation, and covert operations—in an apparent effort to expand its long-standing foothold there and prevent the EU from strengthening its influence in the region.<sup>43</sup> Moscow has long sought to capitalize on the Western Balkan nations' historic grievances against each other and the unfinished EU and NATO business there in the aftermath of the wars of the 1990s. The Kremlin has always detested NATO's intervention in the Western Balkans and has viewed Kosovo's independence as illegitimate. In addition to Moscow's usual fare of anti-EU and anti-NATO propaganda and encouragement of Serbian nationalism,<sup>44</sup> in October 2016, Russian operatives attempted a coup in Montenegro.<sup>45</sup> In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Kremlin has encouraged Serb nationalism and Republika Srpska's separatist ambitions.<sup>46</sup>

Russia is hardly in a position to bring stability and security to the Western Balkans. But that does not appear to be the goal of its activities. Rather, it appears intent on disrupting EU efforts to stabilize the region and prevent Serbia and other Western Balkan countries—Albania, Macedonia, and Montenegro—from joining the EU, and thus sustaining a perennial point of vulnerability for Europe.

Beyond Europe and the Middle East, Russian diplomacy has been active in South Africa and Central America—places where a Russian presence has long been thought of as a relic of the Cold War. In South Africa, the main thrust of Russian activity—aside from both countries' participation in the BRICS, a club of rising regional powers that also includes Brazil, China, and India—appears to be economic diplomacy. The Kremlin has courted South Africa's President Jacob Zuma and got him to sign a major deal<sup>47</sup>—\$76 billion, or more

than one-quarter of South Africa's GDP of \$280 billion—to build a series of nuclear power plants. In addition to that deal, which has caused a major political controversy in South Africa, the two countries agreed to cooperate on intelligence and defense matters.<sup>48</sup>

In Nicaragua, where Russian ties date back to the Sandinista government of the 1980s, U.S. officials are reportedly concerned by an expanding Russian presence.<sup>49</sup> The two countries have signed a security cooperation agreement, which includes arms shipments and a suspected new Russian listening post.<sup>50</sup> The fact that Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega has been president of Nicaragua since 2007 makes it easier for Russia to build and sustain ties for the new era.

Russian activities are not limited to rekindling old Cold War-era ties. In Afghanistan, Russia has engaged the Taliban in a dialogue and, according to U.S. military leaders, supplied the group with weapons.<sup>51</sup> Information about the exact nature of these weapons deliveries has not been made public. But considering the role of U.S. weapons deliveries to the Afghan mujahideen in defeating the Soviet army in the 1980s—especially the Stinger man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS)—a tit-for-tat by an emboldened Russia long skeptical of U.S. efforts to defeat the Taliban and exploring a possible deal with the Taliban should not be ruled out.

## CONCLUSION

Since 2014, Europe and the United States have encountered a new Russia. It has made a deliberate choice to abandon the last vestiges of a cooperative security arrangement in Europe and transition to a posture of sustained confrontation. The Kremlin has pursued this posture in multiple domains and geographic theaters. Moscow has transitioned from a largely defensive mode in the previous decade, when it sought to protect its own sphere of influence, to an offensive mode intended to undermine and disrupt the global liberal order led by Europe and the United States. Both of them have been targeted by Russian offensive operations. The scale and scope of this effort indicates that the Kremlin considers this an existential confrontation and is prepared to sustain it for the long run.

The Kremlin has been successful so far and has accomplished major breakthroughs—in changing the course of the Syrian civil war, in interfering in elections in the United States and Europe, in promoting discord in NATO and the EU, and in positioning Russia as a major actor on the world stage. In pursuing these activities, the Kremlin has demonstrated its command of significant military, economic, diplomatic, and disinformation resources as well as agility and resolve in using them. It has been willing to take risks, which have paid off.

As Putin approaches the 2018 presidential election and—most likely—a fourth term as president of Russia, there is little to suggest that there is either elite or public opposition to his foreign policy course. In fact, the Russian public appears quite receptive to the idea of a new Cold War. As a new generation of Russian elite rises to the top—a generation for whom the formative experience has not been the retreat and implosion of the late 1980s and 1990s, but the resurgence and victories of 2014 and beyond—Russia appears poised to sustain this new Cold War for the foreseeable future.

This is not to say that cooperation with Russia is no longer possible and that there should be no dealings with it. The West and the Soviet Union cooperated on a number of issues of mutual importance and maintained contacts throughout the Cold War. Moreover, contacts and clear, reliable communication channels are more important at times of heightened tensions than when tensions are low. Contacts at the highest level are also essential, considering Putin's personal control of key foreign policy issues and unique decisionmaking role.

Some critical Cold War–era issues remain relevant today. These include, first of all, issues of vital national security importance for both sides, such as nuclear arms control and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Engaging Russia on these issues—whether on resolving disagreements about existing arms control agreements or the future of the nuclear arms control regime, nuclear modernization and strategic stability, or conventional arms control—is in the interests of Europe and the United States.

The tense situation along the line of contact between NATO and Russia carries the risk of escalation. Engaging Russia on managing this situation and avoiding dangerous accidents is important even if Russia continues to engage in deliberately provocative behavior.

In Syria, U.S. and other forces in the coalition against the self-proclaimed Islamic State operate in close proximity to Russian forces. Maintaining contacts with the Russian military to coordinate coalition and Russian activities in these conditions is necessary to avoid accidents and misunderstandings, even if U.S. and European objectives in Syria differ from Russia's goals there.

Russia's increased global activism means that the likelihood of the United States, its European allies, and Russia bumping into each other will grow. Maintaining channels of communication with Russia will be more, not less, important in these circumstances. Besides, a number of problems of global significance—from rules of the road in cyberspace to North Korea—cannot be addressed without Russia's involvement.

These are just some examples of areas where the United States and Europe will need to stay engaged with Russia. Such engagement should be seen not as a favor or a concession to Russia but as a necessity for Europe and the United States. Russia is too big and too important to ignore, especially as the relationship between it and the West has deteriorated and there is little prospect for improvement. However, engagement with Russia should not be mistaken for a form of partnership. Rather, it should be seen as an element of a relationship that promises to be transactional and fundamentally competitive and at times adversarial, rather than cooperative, for the foreseeable future.

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## NOTES

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