



# Competition in 2028

**Anticipating Russian Exploitation of the  
Operational Environment**



Training and Doctrine Command G-2

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## Anticipating Russian Exploitation of the Operational Environment

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## Executive Summary

Using a modified *Grounded Theory* methodology, an *Exploitable Conditions Framework*, and case studies, this paper analyzes Russia's range of global exploitation activities and their impact on U.S. national security and strategic interests. The analysis anticipates the most exploitable, preferred conditions and methods by which Russia could gain and maintain its competitive influence through 2028.

This study indicates that as Russia pursues its national interests toward 2028, there will be progressive and more potent paths facilitating Russian leverage of international cooperation opportunities, exploitation of events, and limited use of a wide variety of military actions conducted roughly according to what its General Staff calls "New-Type War" (aka "Russian New Generation Warfare"). This approach emphasizes the cognitive domain and places a deliberate emphasis on non-military activities. Specifically, this *Grounded Theory* research -- using the *Exploitable Conditions Framework* -- suggests that Russia's strategy will consistently include: (a) Unifying and solidifying support for Russia globally, (b) Reducing and weakening NATO and Western influence, (c) Employing energy diplomacy and coercion, (d) Fomenting divisions between opposition groups, and (e) Creating armed dependencies and conducting limited military actions.

Also, according to this research methodology, the following competitive scenarios could emerge:

- Russia will exploit conflicts between state and non-state actors, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. It will seek easy, quick, and immediate economic benefits in distant spaces where it has low competitive advantage against the United States, China, India, or the European Union, while appearing to compete politically.
- With globalization increasing the integration of world systems, global dynamism will continue to shift from Europe to Asia and the Pacific region—and to some extent Africa. As a result of Russia's weaknesses -- including resource shortfalls, insufficient national cohesion to spur economic growth, and military reform that is largely unable to project Russian power beyond its near abroad -- Russia will not be able to slow this shift of momentum away from Europe.
- Russia will pragmatically seek to bolster its strategic national security interests by maintaining strong influence in its near abroad, particularly post-Soviet states. However, Russia will continue to remain a key player along with NATO and the European Union in maintaining the European security framework.

- Russia will seek to maintain its status as a first-tier member of all primary, global rules-making organizations, including the UN, WTO, G-20, etc. and to use these organizations to bolster its foreign policy and engage rivals.
- Russia will prefer to avoid overt economic and military competition with the United States. Moreover, it is not in Russia's calculus or interest to engage ideologically; rather, Russia will take measures that accumulate quick wins to achieve its strategic goals. These measures will be underpinned by continuous efforts to leverage or even dominate key areas of the information sphere as it relates to competition.

## Introduction

Twenty-first Century military operations are increasingly complex; they span multiple domains, involve a myriad of state and non-state actors, and occur within an expanded and accelerated battlespace and along a dynamic spectrum. The U.S. Army's concept of Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) guides this dynamic environment, which is characterized by a persistent state of competition punctuated by conflict. The Army's role is to deter adversaries through competition below the threshold of armed conflict and, when necessary, to penetrate, dis-integrate, exploit, and force a return to competition on favorable terms.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. military has not historically associated competition with conventional military operations; however, many of the United States' "2+3" adversaries are adept at competition and do not make the same distinction between competition and conflict. These competitors are continually seeking advantage over other actors, and especially the United States, across all domains, through all OE variables,<sup>1</sup> and with all instruments of power. Understanding an adversary's capabilities and capacity to achieve its competition goals allows the U.S. Army to support U.S. deterrence options and, if called upon, deploy, fight, and win the nation's wars.

Russia is a significant competitor of the United States and wields influence around the globe. It presents distinct challenges to the United States from other peer or near-peer competitors. The purpose of this paper is to provide Army leaders with a conception of potential Russian exploitation actions that might impact U.S. interests, to inform planning and preparation activities, and to inspire forward thinking with an alternative methodology. This paper explores a range of current Russian exploitation activities across diverse environments and examines this knowledge to anticipate how Russia may exploit the future operational environment to gain competitive advantage over the United States. The overarching research questions are informed by the following questions:

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<sup>1</sup> The U.S. military's operational variables also known as "PMESII-PT" (political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, physical terrain and time) is a tool used by soldiers to shape a structured approach for an action in an operational environment in which they analyze the external environment.



- Which conditions of the operational environment are conducive to Russian exploitation?
- Based on our understanding of Russian strategy, how might Russia exploit conditions in 2028?
- What are the implications of Russian exploitation efforts?

This paper, along with the case studies, uses the *Exploitable Conditions Framework* (see Appendix A) to understand the most exploitable, preferred of Russian global competition activities and assesses their strategic impact on U.S. national security and global influence. These case studies address how Russian engagement strategies are designed to shape or react to specific country-level dynamics in accord with Russia's domestic, regional, and foreign policy realities. The studies also highlight how these strategies permit Russia to compete with other great powers, particularly the United States, China, and the European Union. However, as Russia expands its footprint by exploiting conditions within divided or conflicted societies, it becomes embroiled in contestations with other domestic, regional, and international actors, potentially attenuating its influence and interfering with its ability to achieve its ambitious agenda.

## Methodology

Analysis was conducted in phases, relying on the *Exploitable Conditions Framework*, seven case studies, a literature review of Russia's strategic interests, and research on Russia in the near future. The *Exploitable Conditions Framework* projects **the most exploitable, preferred conditions and activities** that will define the strategic environment through 2028.<sup>ii</sup> Operationalized as a set of 24 variables, this framework foreshadows obstacles and opportunities for domestic and foreign actors to dominate their rivals and advance their own national interests (Appendix A includes the full list of exploitable conditions). These conditions are dynamic and may be, at times, mutually reinforcing or countervailing variables, and may not all be present in any one country at any given time. Within the environments that Russia operates, these conditions may challenge or bolster Russia's exploitation or engagement strategies. More importantly, it is not necessary for all or even several exploitable conditions to align in order to present opportunities or obstacles to Russia. However, the presence of multiple conditions and their interactions (or lack thereof) increases the nature and scale of the OE's domestic challenges and therefore its vulnerability to Russian exploitation. Notably, Russia and other competitors will exploit some conditions more than others.

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<sup>ii</sup> Found in Appendix A, Exploitable Conditions of the Strategic Environment to 2028 were developed for a previous TRADOC G2 product (2019) and determined to be a useful framework to anticipate actor exploitation. 2028 was selected as a near future projection as it provides enough time to possibly depart from current conditions and still a somewhat knowable future. The conditions were drawn from a large body of extant literature in this area projecting out to this approximate timeframe and developed from a modified grounded theory methodological approach. Exploitable conditions are also consistent with TRADOC's Changing Character of Future Warfare forecasts.

Our research, using a modified *Grounded Theory* methodology, addresses seven OE case analyses to scrutinize Russian strategy in light of the 2028 strategic environment. These cases are exemplars, as each includes multiple strategic conditions as well as particular Russian interests which span across all U.S. combatant commands. The case studies include the Arctic (USNORTHCOM), Venezuela (USSOUTHCOM), Israel (USEUCOM), Iran (USCENTCOM), Central African Republic (USAFRICOM), India (USINDO-PACOM), and the Republic of Georgia (USEUCOM), and detail how the complex mosaic of exploitable conditions diverge across countries and regions. Each environment offers Russia a different set of options. That these exploitable conditions can diverge, at times significantly, poses one set of risks for Russia. That these countries and regions are open to other actors historically resistant or antagonistic to Russian machinations, poses another set of risks for Russia. Finally, there are internal and regional dynamics that complicate the picture and highlight the probable limits of exploitative Russian behavior. **Findings were inductively drawn by coding and categorizing details of Russian activities and actions to draw out salient themes. These emergent themes were then cross referenced with our research on Russia's strategic interests and its near-future, and then triangulated with Russian experts from the U.S. Intelligence Community, the Department of Defense, academic institutions, think tanks, and others who specialize in research relevant to this study.**

This full approach was designed to understand how Russia may influence and ultimately gain a strategic advantage against its major competitors—most importantly the United States. Russia and other adversaries understand that the application of any or all elements of national power in competition, just below the threshold of armed conflict, is an effective strategy against the United States. How OE vulnerabilities are exploited has enormous significance for U.S. foreign policy and national security priorities. The implications are also critical for how the U.S. Army plans, organizes, trains, and equips the future force for success. For a detailed understanding of this methodology, see Appendix D. Additionally, this report includes a number of other appendices that provide the reader a detailed look into the data and process that resulted in the analysis presented in this study. The appendices are:

- Appendix A: The Exploitable Conditions Framework
- Appendix B: Russian Strategy
- Appendix C: Operational Environment Case Studies
- Appendix D: Methodology
- Appendix E: References

## Competition in the Near Future

Competition is an enduring challenge that requires sustained commitment and attention. In particular, inter-state competition has become a primary concern in U.S. National Security.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the National Security Strategy directs the Army to prepare for “growing political, economic and military competitions around the world.”<sup>3</sup> However, competition for the United States is not generalized, but contained and intense between a handful of select states.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is important that the United States understands the distinct nature of each of its competitors, including Russia.

Furthermore, U.S. interests and operations are notably impacted by OE conditions across the operational environment and particularly during competition. Competitors not only understand the power of the conditions in the OE and their latent effects on U.S. interests and operations, but also that exploitation of these conditions magnify the consequences—yielding an advantage for them and a potential strategic stand-off from the United States. The Army Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) concept introduces the idea that U.S. competitors can and will exploit the operational environment; however MDO stops short of identifying *what* conditions are exploitable and preferable to particular actors. Thus, to enable understanding of competitor exploitation, this study uses the aforementioned *Exploitable Conditions Framework* to address this challenge (Appendix A).

## Russia’s Strategic Interests

Russia seeks to ensure its military, political, and economic security through an uncontested and exclusive sphere of influence.<sup>5</sup> To do so, Russia outlines three main objectives and two secondary objectives. First and foremost, Russia pursues its own protection and preservation of the regime. Secondly, Russia wants recognition and response as one of the world’s great powers. Thirdly, Russia seeks predominance in its near abroad. Russia also seeks to create state prosperity by pursuing competitive markets. Additionally, the Kremlin views any and all interference in these objectives, and all parties associated, as undermining its authority, destabilizing its control, and a direct threat to Russian interests.<sup>6</sup>

### Russia’s Strategic Interests

- Protection and security
- Recognition as one of world’s great powers
- Maintaining predominance in the region/exert near abroad influence
- Developing state prosperity with increasingly competitive market economies
- Countering interference in these objectives, (perceiving that parties associated are a direct threat to Russia).

Russian leadership determines which instruments of national power are most effective at achieving its strategic interests. Russia recognizes that much of its application of national

power will occur without resorting to armed conflict, and it calculates the cost benefit based on measures developed by its General Staff chief, General Valery Gerasimov.<sup>iii</sup> Russia will likely continue to use this calculus to determine the application of asymmetric and indirect competition actions to counter the West on the world stage. Russia does not employ a single warfare doctrine like the United States or China, but rather a series of doctrinal concepts that are applied when and if the conditions determine they are right. Russia's "New-Type War" (aka "Russian New Generation Warfare") approach responds to particular conditions that allow Russia to achieve many of its competitive goals without the employment of conventional military force . . . but with the capability to engage with conventional force when necessary.<sup>7</sup>

This broad application of Russia's instruments of national power -- intended to advance Russia's strategic interests and operate below the threshold of armed conflict -- is characterized by:<sup>8</sup>

- Pressuring the enemy politically, economically, informationally, and psychologically;
- Disorienting the political military leadership of the opponent and spreading dissatisfaction among the population; and
- Deploying armed opposition detachments (e.g., proxies or partner military forces) to contested regions.

These measures include the broader efforts of intensifying diplomatic pressure and the use of information operations to influence regional and global actors with a narrative that aligns with Moscow's intent. Further competition involves covertly deploying and employing special operation forces, cyber-attacks and software effects, conducting reconnaissance and subversive acts on a large scale, supporting internal opposition, and employing new weapon systems as a deterrence. Russia may shift to more open and direct, limited military action *if it calculates* the need for escalating to armed conflict to achieve its aims.<sup>9</sup> In this scenario -- within a spectrum of continuous influence operations -- it would likely attempt to engage with overwhelming force and rapid



Photo by Remy Steinegger / CC BY-SA  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vladimir\\_Putin\\_20090128\\_2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vladimir_Putin_20090128_2.jpg)

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<sup>iii</sup> General Gerasimov estimated the use of non-military to military measures as a ratio of four to one (See Appendix B).



execution to create immediate, new conditions. These conditions would facilitate disengagement from armed conflict and a transition to a more dominant geopolitical position: altogether a kind of ultimate, competitive move.

One underlying principle on which Russia predicates its worldview is that no populace, governing body, or nation may challenge its sovereignty. At its most extreme, Russia believes that it has been attacked persistently – for over two decades -- by the United States and NATO; otherwise, it believes its intentions are misunderstood and purposely misrepresented.

By association, Russia believes many others in the world community follow suit. These beliefs are augmented by a perception among Russian elites that Russia is a strategic rival of the United States and that Moscow's role in an inevitable contest is to compete against this influence and provide a balance in world affairs.<sup>10</sup> Whether labeled competitors or rivals, these views place Washington and Moscow at odds, especially regarding Russian near abroad states and Western Europe. Russia's geographic position, which lacks major natural barriers, creates security concerns for Moscow and especially President Putin. Russia has traditionally viewed itself through a siege mentality which has manifested through hundreds of years of foreign invasions from every direction. This



Photo from President of Russia website:  
<https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56351>

Russian worldview fuels its long-standing need for strong influence, if not control, in its “Near Abroad”. Furthermore, Russia does not trust NATO and is concerned with NATO moving closer to its borders. As a result, Russia has a heightened sensitivity to what it perceives as unacceptable Western encroachment. This, in turn, leads Russia to focus on creating spheres of influence, promoting narratives, and conducting activities that protect its vulnerable borders.

Russia’s view of the United States as a superpower seeking preeminence in a unipolar world provides a clear rival to compete against. Russia’s future goals are centered on galvanizing the regime and establishing its rightful place on the global stage. Doing this means increasing its influence—most importantly in its near abroad by Russia’s zero sum calculations means reducing Western influence in these areas. Thus, Moscow views its competition with the West as a constant state of world affairs in which it will continue employing all instruments of national power to establish stability under Russian influence.

Through 2028, the Kremlin leadership -- to include Vladimir Putin and then members of his political network -- will continue to use the calculus of risk-versus-benefits to determine the country’s application of its instruments of national power in an integrated manner to achieve its strategic goals.<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed understanding of these instruments, see *Appendix B*. This approach will not negate use of military force to accomplish national goals in concert with other instruments, or when other instruments are ineffective or unavailable. Nor are Russia’s indirect responses always a precursor to military force. Russia will continually evaluate conditions to calculate the necessary response and any need to elevate.

Ultimately, Russia will apply all instruments of national power to assert sovereignty and pursue its perceived destiny to be a preeminent power in a multipolar world. Furthermore, Russia believes that its traditional values and conservatism must oppose what it perceives as hegemonic U.S. actions.<sup>12</sup> These beliefs establish a rationale for all of Russia’s actions and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future, even in the face of notable challenges.

## **Russia in the Near Future**

At present, Russia is a significant, near-peer competitor of the United States. It presents challenges to the United States distinct from other peer or near-peer competitors. Over the next decade, Russia will likely remain militarily superior to all its immediate Non-NATO neighbors other than China. In absence of willing state partners, Russia has demonstrated an ability to influence and subvert states in its near abroad to acquire support and loyalty among governments or factions (e.g., in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova). Furthermore, Russia has demonstrated in Syria its interest in expeditionary warfare beyond the region. Moreover, Russian influence in the Americas is especially apparent in Venezuela. While

Russia possesses leverage points in all of these areas, it also faces significant future challenges that it may not easily overcome.

Russia's nuclear weaponry and natural resources allow it to punch above its weight on the world stage. The country's strengths include an educated populace and a modestly adequate transportation and communications infrastructure. Sino-Russian relations have drastically improved since the fall of the Soviet Union, and Russia will continue to diversify energy efforts to benefit from partnerships with a global pacer like China.

Yet, some trend lines for the next ten years appear to not be in Russia's favor. The country's weaknesses include a stagnant economy, a near-negative population growth projected to decrease more than 5% over the next 20 years,<sup>13</sup> low levels of investment, ill-distributed economic development, and persistent corruption. In addition, Russia likely faces a number of domestic concerns such as a looming political succession crisis, a limited capacity for military modernization, and an over reliance on extractive industries. All these concerns are metastasized by time and no indications of progressive innovation, and the latter concern is complicated by a limited capacity to attract substantial new sources for economic investment. Furthermore, climate change will possibly wreak havoc on Russian permafrost, presenting yet another domestic challenge. Russia knows it is facing an uphill battle; understanding its history, interests, and strategy helps us to anticipate how Russia is likely to respond as this future arrives.



Photo by Petar Milošević / Public domain  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russian\\_rubles.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russian_rubles.jpg)

Russia's legislature recently approved an amendment that resets the count on presidential terms. This conceivably paves the way for Putin to stay in the Presidency through 2036, or as some suggest for the remainder of his life. Even if Putin is required to run again, it is unlikely he would lose,<sup>14</sup> and if he steps aside, many analysts believe he will still have paramount influence. Regardless, his leadership presents a somewhat predictable path of Russia's intentions, interests and strategies.



## Anticipating Exploitation of the Operational Environment

Forecasting Russia's future actions involves an examination of its strategic interests, projecting its strengths and vulnerabilities, and scrutinizing its current behavior in various regions within the OE. Russia perceives that its application of instruments of national power, preferably below the threshold of armed conflict, can effectively support its strategy. Not only does Russia use a risk-benefit equation to select those options that will produce an optimal impact at acceptable costs, it carefully determines the appropriate means and measures to achieve them. Furthermore, Russia capitalizes on its experience and views the world as an arena of continuous competition. With the support of Russian leadership, Russian elite, legitimate and influencing organizations like the Russian Orthodox Church, and its ability to leverage criminal networks when necessary, the Russian State can maintain legitimacy domestically and project its power internationally.

**Preferred OE Conditions.** President Putin's potential retention of power over the next 15 years should help the United States understand and prepare for Russia's behavior as we move toward 2028. Our case studies project that Russia will continue, at some level, to remain adept at operating during a persistent state of competition. By examining how Russia might exploit particular states around the globe, we find that its preferred conditions include the ability to:

(1) Leverage new international cooperation models to advance transactional and opportunistic partnerships,

Russia's Approach to Exploitation into 2028	
Russia's approach is primarily the enactment of Putin's master plan to establish Russia as a major player on the global stage by eroding the established liberal world order. His plan involves denying access (e.g., people, places, and information) and as well as engaging in opportunistic, transactional, and non-binding partnerships that increase influence and subsequently Russian position.	
Russia will leverage the international system to advance its own interests while attempting to distract and constrain others, including the US, and simultaneously manipulate the international system from within to achieve Russian objectives.	
Preferred Conditions	Preferred Methods
New International Cooperation Models	Russia will leverage less conventional, non-binding agreements with similar minded or vulnerable stakeholders.
Multi-polar World	Russia will present itself as a viable partners option at a time where power can be distributed among more than a few significant poles and effectively reduce the influence of legacy powers.
Resource Competition	Russia will exploit contests between actors to secure needed or desired resources—especially energy or resources needed to develop weapons.
Interdependent Economies (Economic Specialization)	Russia looks for opportunities to capitalize on economic specialization and global interdependency and when possible usurp or block western partnerships.
Infrastructure Capacity Challenges	Russia targets areas that can both promote them as the partner of choice and reduce other powers as partners of choice by providing capital investments especially in energy and security sectors.
Additional global conditions Russia exploits: Competing narratives, use of proxies, contested spaces and factionalized and polarized societies.	

(2) Encourage growth of a multi-polar world to reduce the influence of legacy powers,

- (3) Exploit contests between actors to secure needed or desired resources—especially energy or resources needed to develop weapons,
- (4) Capitalize upon economic specialization and growing global interdependency, and
- (5) Take advantage of infrastructure capacity challenges. To a lesser extent, but also notable is Russia's exploitation of competing narratives, use of proxies, and fomenting divisions existing in contested spaces to erode stability and increase Russian influence.



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[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russia\\_NATO\\_flags.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russia_NATO_flags.svg)

**Preferred Methods.** The case studies, with their future projections, suggest Russia is expanding its global influence in several specific ways. Notably, Russia will pragmatically seek strategic and opportunistic, transactional, and non-permanent (contractual) economic, diplomatic and security partnerships. Partnerships with limited or loose requirements unbound by ideology will provide Russia with strategic agility. Russia views conflict as a science and will evaluate relationships through a calculus that assesses some partnerships as expendable (e.g., Central African Republic) and others as less disposable (e.g., Israel), based on the benefit horizon. Although Russia has specific objectives regarding individual countries, the case studies suggest that Russia's approach will consistently include:

***Reducing and weakening NATO and Western influence.*** Russia's actions suggest deliberate and persistent intent to counter and weaken NATO and



Western influence. Russia views NATO as hostile to its interests and a major obstacle to regime security, predominance in the near abroad, and world power status. As a result, it perceives NATO as purpose-built to contain Russia because it aggressively encroaches into Russia's near abroad and historic areas of influence.

***Employing Energy diplomacy and coercion.*** Russia's economy is heavily dependent on the energy sector. As a major energy exporter, it will continue to use energy as a tool for political and economic influence. Russia uses the interconnectivity of its energy sector, business, and corruption networks for influence. Russia calculates the return on investment to extend beyond economic benefits. In its near abroad, dependence on Russian energy resources creates economic client states that increase the depth of Moscow's protection and sovereignty by mitigating NATO encroachment. Russia's ability to control the means and modes of energy production and exert control over pricing provides domestic economic stability and increases Russian influence in Western Europe and with U.S./Western partner states. Also, Russia is pursuing a growing energy trade market with China that accounts for a significant percentage of Russia's crude exports. In 2018, Russian was China's largest crude oil supplier.<sup>15</sup> Russia seeks to replace China's legacy Western partners and build a substantive energy market with the most populous country in the world. Russia's economy depends heavily on exports of crude oil, petroleum products, and natural gas, which account for about half of the country's federal budget.<sup>16</sup> China's recent decline in domestic oil production has increased its dependence on oil imports, suggesting that it will remain a welcome customer of Russia's energy.

***Creating Armed Dependencies.*** Russia uses arms sales and military diplomacy as foreign policy tools to create dependencies, as well as military interoperability that it can leverage in the future. Although it lags far behind the oil and gas trade, arms trade is the second largest source of Russian national income and the Kremlin will expend great effort to protect this market. Because the political and militarily advantages of arms sales may surpass their immediate economic benefits, Russia will continue to use them as a foreign policy tool to gain influence and create dependencies. One of its tactics is to serve as a loan agent to help countries acquire the new military equipment. Russia also gifts arms and equipment to countries that lack the financial means to purchase the goods and in doing so creates additional levers of influence.



Photo from President of Russia website:  
[en.kremlin.ru/events/president/trips/page/2&psig=AOvVaw0WEZLqGFGa4PS58EqNoqTg&ust=1595079098319075](https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/trips/page/2&psig=AOvVaw0WEZLqGFGa4PS58EqNoqTg&ust=1595079098319075)

Increased military bilateral and multilateral engagements and events have also opened up the door to Russian influence. Military exercises with post-Soviet “Near Abroad” neighbors, and also with China, have been on an increasing trend line for some years and will continue.<sup>iv</sup> This is added to newer, similar events with states in Africa, countries like Venezuela, and joint operations with partners in Syria.

In short, these arms sales -- complemented with military diplomacy -- and energy trade continue to finance Russia’s heavy investment in its military capabilities that began over the last decade. As part of competition below the threshold of direct conflict, Russia routinely uses this credible threat of immense military force as a means of coercion. Of course, Russia’s ultimate tool of deterrence and intimidation is its nuclear weapons capability—especially for Great Power Competition.

***Fomenting divisions between opposition groups.*** Russia pursues its strategic interests with a divide and rule approach to political influence activities against the West.<sup>17</sup> Moscow attempts this on three levels: At the strategic level, Russia attempts to divide Western allies, especially within NATO; at the interstate level, it exploits division and distrust between nations in key areas of interest; and finally, at the intrastate level, it exploits internal division between various groups in

<sup>iv</sup> For a substantive listing of Russian military exercises and similar defense activities in Central Asia, please see the following: Matthew Stein, “Compendium of Central Asian Military and Security Activity,” *Foreign Military Studies Office*, November 20, 2019, <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-monographs/194880/download>.

individual countries of interest. When this manipulation leads to instability, Russia positions itself to mediate between vulnerable actors. Russia understands the importance of controlling the narrative. Information campaigns typically promote Russian policies while criticizing the United States and host nation efforts. Russia gathers information early, presents its views quickly, and establishes initial influence with a plausible narrative.<sup>18</sup> Russia may not invent division, but it will masterfully “elevate, exploit, and distort divides and grievances that already are present.”<sup>19</sup> Russia also uses American or other western groups as witting or unwitting proxies to instigate anger, create chaos, and stir conflict. Furthermore, Russia adapts quickly to make detection more difficult.<sup>20</sup> In particular, it effectively manages perception and influences behavior by employing reflexive control -- which involves tacit manipulation at its finest level.<sup>21</sup> Russia’s influence activities aim to create distrust in fragmented, distracted or chaotic societies. This provides Russia greater freedom of action and opportunities to extend influence.

***Unifying and solidifying support for Russian globally.*** Russia targets the Russian Diaspora, its Slavic co-ethnics, and other supportive constituencies to maintain and build global support of its policies and interests. Its methods for coalescing these supporters across the globe differ from country to country, but is rooted in utilizing all instruments of national power (especially information) and extending pragmatic and informal diplomacy efforts to influence these groups.

- **The Russian Diaspora.** The collapse of the USSR left over 25 million ethnic Russians outside of the Russian Federation, creating sizable minorities in several former Soviet republics.<sup>22</sup> For some time, these ethnic Russians have experienced political, social, and economic marginalization. In 2001, President Putin publicly introduced the concept of a “Russian World” (*Russkiy Mir*), which had been devised by intellectuals, academics, and journalists close to the Kremlin around 1995–2000. Putin has promoted this concept to justify his country’s efforts to protect and unite primarily Russian diaspora communities regardless of their location, and defines them in the sphere of Russian interest.<sup>23</sup> The Kremlin has gone so far as to offer passports and even citizenship to non-citizen members of Russian diasporas and Russian-speaking enclaves throughout the “Near Abroad” in a renewed form of “Russianization.”<sup>v</sup> Also, Russia adroitly uses the Russian Orthodox Church to institutionalize and sustain a vast Russian identity. The Russian Orthodox Church serves an important unifier as it works in concert with the Russian Ministry of

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<sup>v</sup> “Russianization” was a Stalin-era program of settling ethnic Russians in Soviet Socialist Republics and appointing them to leadership positions to ensure central control over all parts of the USSR.

Foreign Affairs to maintain -- at minimum -- a latent “union” that was lost with the fall of communism.<sup>vi24</sup>

- **Pan-Slavism.** President Putin continues to capitalize on any disenfranchisement and has enacted a kind of modern pan-Slavism, especially since many are inclined to support Russia vice their host country.<sup>25</sup> Putin’s pledge to protect Russians, sometimes referred to as the Putin doctrine, offers a unifying Slavic identity that allows Russia to nationalize beyond its borders.<sup>26</sup> Russia’s cultivation of this identity creates a perceived justification for Russian military or “defensive” measures to safeguard Russian “citizens.”
- **Other Compatriots (“Sootechestvenniki”).** Besides those in the “Russian World” and pan-Slavic communities, Russia cultivates individuals and entities of supporters from business, political parties, and other civic associations. These *sootechestvenniki* or “compatriots”<sup>27</sup> help spread and unify their efforts. This can range from military clients in Syria and Venezuela to those with hydrocarbon interests and reactionary politics. Russia uses the Russian Orthodox Church to bring together supporters in this way also.

## Conclusion and Implications for the U.S. Army

The findings of this study, based on the Russian preferred conditions and methods identified through the *Exploitable Conditions Framework* and *Modified Grounded Theory*, indicate that Russia believes it is engaged in a war to design and shape a new order by Great Powers and this will continue into 2028. Russia is working to establish conditional political and economic relationships around the world that replace formal arrangements, in order to increase Russian influence and decrease Western and U.S. power. The Kremlin views the world as zero sum; thus, in order to advance, others must recede.<sup>28</sup>

The analysis projects Russian activities in various areas of the OE across U.S. combatant commands. It illustrates how Russia may exploit global or regional conditions to weaken U.S., EU, and NATO advantages. Russia’s actions are likely to target the United States and West through a divide and rule approach, leveraging all instruments of national power. Although Russia has specific objectives related to each country and will tailor its approach to each, its overarching purpose is to erode U.S./Western authority and surmount barriers that constrict its operating activities (e.g., sanctions, restrictive international rules). Russia will exert a higher level of actions and influence in its near abroad, as its reach and

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<sup>vi</sup> For a broader read on Russian state influence through the Orthodox Church, please see the following: Robert W. Kurz, “Ukraine and Moldova: A Qualitative Comparison of Perspectives on Russian Influence,” Foreign Military Studies Office, October 11, 2019, <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-monographs/295483/download>.

influence will be tempered by near-term and longer range domestic challenges. Russia's use of tools, techniques, and actions around the world are not radically different from its near abroad approaches.

Global competition will continue to escalate. However, competition is likely to be more intense among a handful of specific states with status grievances and countervailing regional and global coalitions (e.g., Russia, China).<sup>29</sup> The most obvious flashpoints for emerging competition lie in regional territorial claims and the growing tendency of authoritarian states to extend their reach and control beyond their borders.<sup>30</sup> Although competition implies there is a victor, it may be better for the United States to understand competition and its conditions not as a contest, but as a persistent struggle for advantage that must be constantly managed rather than won.

The United States will need to anticipate the actions and intentions of its peer and near-peer competitors. Competition will likely be most persistent in non-military domains targeting areas where the United States is not focusing and less adept. As we move toward 2028, Putin is assumed to continue to lead the country, whether directly or through his influence. Despite his older age by 2028, Putin, acting as the state, will still intend to "shape a world consistent with Russia's authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations' economic, diplomatic, and security decisions."<sup>31</sup> At this time, Russia's decisions are a reflection of Putin's personality traits and worldviews.<sup>32</sup> Putin will continue to use a competitive authoritarian strategy to subvert and control national interests and marginalize domestic challenges. While helping Russia to remain nimble, this short-sighted strategy could degrade Russia's ability to exploit the OE farther into the future.

An assessment of Russia's challenges as we approach 2028 results from a combination of factors, including:

- **Putin's effort to maintain his political power**--which will inherently make him distrustful of domestic entities and activities he perceives as threats. This will prompt him to take further measures to increase his domestic control.
- **A changing geopolitical context**--whereby Russia is surrounded by more economically, demographically, and politically dynamic countries and regions. This includes an economically resurgent China, a Middle East that is threatening Russia by spreading conflicts and tensions into Central Asia and the Caucasus, a Europe continually engaged in efforts to build a united coalition against the Russian behemoth despite BREXIT and Russia's failed attempt to integrate, and climate variability that has opened the Arctic as a potential zone of Russian competition with the United States

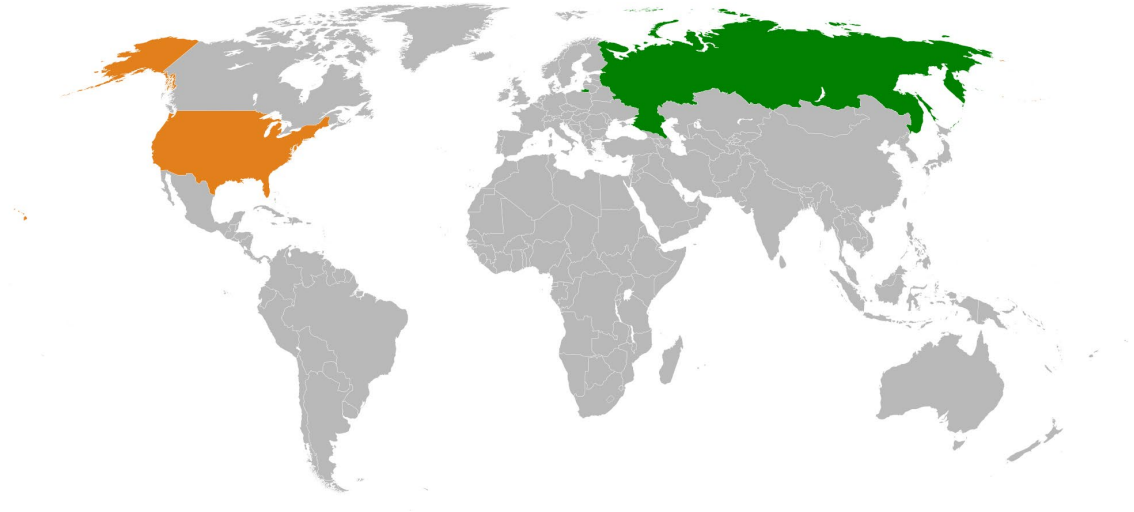


- **Russia's economic difficulties**—which are driven partly by global economic crises, partly by Russia's global over-extension to compete with the United States and China, and by failing to innovate in ways that would spur domestic economic growth.
- **Changes to the nature of power itself**—with soft power including commerce, finance, culture, and ideational symbolisms buttressing the reach and extent of globalization and directly and indirectly minimizing the influence of hard power upon which Russia built its historical influence.

According to this research methodology, the following competitive scenarios could emerge:

- Russia will exploit conflicts between state and non-state actors, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. It will seek easy, quick, and immediate economic benefits in distant spaces where it has low competitive advantage against the United States, China, India, or the European Union, while appearing to compete politically.
- With globalization increasing the integration of world systems, global dynamism will continue to shift from Europe to Asia and the Pacific region—and to some extent Africa. As a result of Russia's weaknesses, including its resource shortfalls, insufficient national cohesion to spur economic growth, and the inability to reform its military to effectively project strategic power beyond its near abroad, Russia will not be able to slow this shift away from Europe.
- Faced with a changing world and domestic limitations, Russia will pragmatically seek to bolster its strategic national security interests by dominating its near abroad -- particularly post-Soviet states -- but will continue to remain a key player along with NATO and the European Union in maintaining the European security framework.
- Russia will seek to maintain its status as a first-tier member of all key global rules-making organizations, including the UN, WTO, G-20, etc. and to use these organizations to bolster its foreign policy and engage rivals.
- Russia will avoid overt economic and military competition with the United States, which will remain the only truly global power with the capability to intervene anywhere in the world. Moreover, it is not in Russia's calculus or interest to engage ideologically; rather, Russia will take measures that accumulate quick wins to achieve its strategic goals. These measures will be underpinned by continuous

efforts to leverage or even dominate key areas of the information sphere as it relates to competition.



























Originally uploaded by Bazonka (Transferred by Nk) / CC BY-SA (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>);  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russia\\_USA\\_Locator.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russia_USA_Locator.svg)

## Implications of this Study

- 1) Russia will use information operations and influence tactics to degrade NATO partnerships and foment internal discord within select NATO members and partners, limiting the willingness and ability of NATO to act in unison either in Eastern Europe or globally;
- 2) Proliferation of Russian weapons systems will complicate U.S. endeavors to train and improve interoperability with select partner states;
- 3) Evolving Russian relationships with current U.S. partners could compromise the availability and security of strategic locations for employing and sustaining U.S. Forces;
- 4) Russia will continue to exert pressure and influence on its dependent energy consumers by threatening supply. United States allies and partners, who depend on Russian energy, may be compelled to withhold specific areas of support for key U.S. interests;
- 5) Russian and Chinese partnerships are already growing and likely to increase as a result of mutual economic interests and geographic proximity, which could result in a united front against the United States in international disputes;
- 6) The possibility of conflict continues, particularly in Russia's near abroad and other periphery countries that have expressed interest in partnering with NATO. Russian influence through ethnic Russians and other Slavs, mutual legal and illegal business interests, and sympathetic political and civic groups, will play a substantive role in this type of conflict.



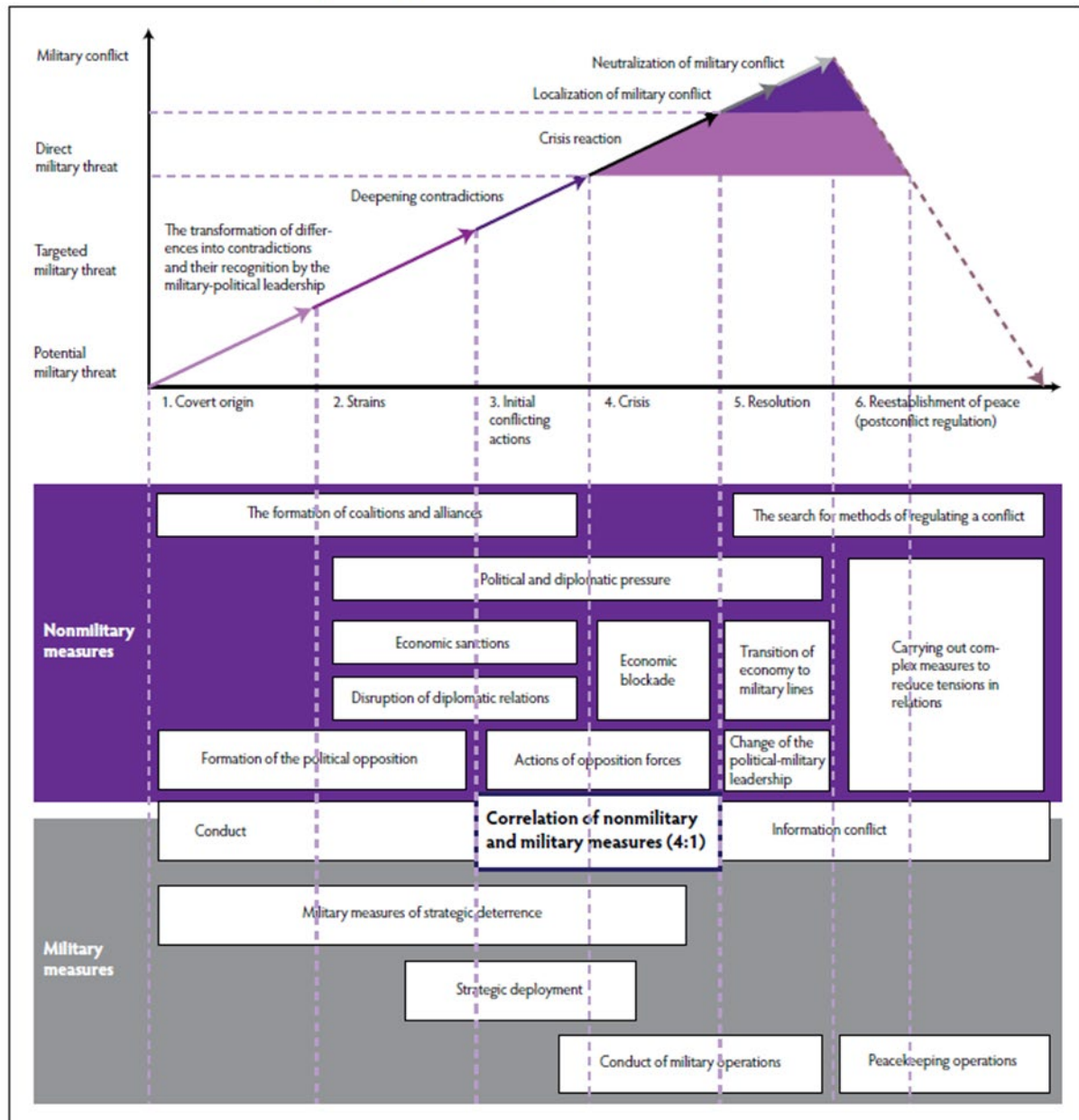
## Appendix A – Exploitable Conditions Framework

ICON	CONDITION	DEFINITION
	Climate Change	Change in global or regional climate patterns resultant from the cumulative effects of global mean surface temperature increase.
	Competing Narratives	Explanations or interpretations of events/ideas originating from a particular perspective and presented to a target audience in order to gain influence.
	Contested Spaces	The physical, cognitive, or heterotopic spheres of competition.
	Crypto-technology Use	The utilization of encryption technology that enables increased security for the transmission and storage of data.
	Demographic Pressures	Factors within a population that reduce the ability of an environment to support that population.
	Disease Evolution	The emergence of new and/or evolved pathogens that impact the way people live.
	Diverse Technology Actors	Non-traditional technology leaders are emerging to compete with traditional technology leaders as new technologies emerge and are implemented globally.
	Dominance of Cities	Concentration of regional/global power in Census Metropolitan Areas (CMA), for example, CMAs may generate a majority of the GDP of a state.
	Economic Inequalities	Unequal distribution of income, wealth, and economic opportunity.
	Effects of Urbanization	Consequences associated with increasingly urbanized populations, for example, pollution, poverty, resource scarcity, etc.
	Erosion of the Liberal World Order	The shift of state and non-state actors from 20th century liberalism to a realist pursuit of self-interests ahead of collective interests, while ignoring or subverting existing international structures and norms.
	Factionalized and Polarized Societies	Societies characterized by increasing divisiveness as a result of conflicting or competing identities.
	Fragile and Failing States	A fragile state is characterized by weak state capacity or weak state legitimacy leaving citizens vulnerable to a range of shocks. A failing state refers to a political body disintegrating toward the point where basic conditions and responsibilities of a sovereign government no longer function properly.
	Information Communication Technology Ubiquity	Near universal access to information and communication around the globe.
	Infrastructure Capacity Challenges	Inadequacy of current systems to meet the needs/challenges of the population.
	Interconnected Economies	Economic systems that are linked to other economic systems.
	Multi-Polar World	A global environment where power is distributed among three or more significant poles (states), each with the ability to generate wealth and/or military capability that can/may threaten other interests and attract other actors into their spheres of influence.
	New International Cooperation Models	The development of new regionalized and specific cooperative agreements, relationships, and institutions that replace or challenge existing agreements, relationships, and institutions.
	Persistent State of Competition	Diverse transnational actors (states, cities, and nonstate actors including VEOs, criminal groups, MNCs, empowered individuals, etc.) compete through all instruments of power (Diplomatic, Information, Military, Economic, Financial, Intelligence, and Legal) and across all domains (Sea, Land, Air, Space, and Cyberspace).
	Resource Competition	Contest between actors to secure needed or desired resources.
	Specialized Economies	Economies focused on a limited scope of goods and services to gain an advantage within a market.
	Technology Access Gaps	Technological advancements and access will vary globally and be primarily available to those with control over its distribution and use.
	Technology-Reliant Societies	Societies are embracing and becoming increasingly reliant upon the digitalization of every aspect of their lives.
	Use of Proxies	Widespread use of surrogates by both state and nonstate actors to further their interests indirectly and with reduced direct risk.

## Appendix B – Russian Strategy Explained

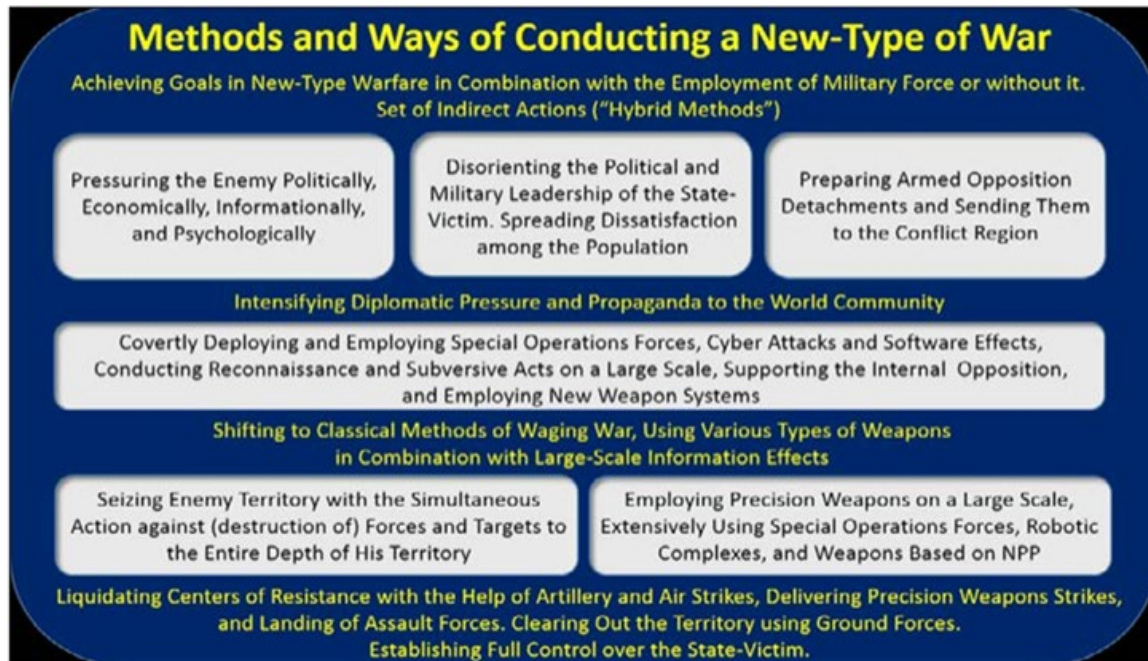
### The Role of Nonmilitary Methods in the Resolution of Interstate Conflicts

The primary phases (stages) of conflict development



**Figure 2. Graphic from Gerasimov article in *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier*, 26 February 2013, translated by Charles Bartles**





Methods and Ways of Conducting a New-Type of War. Courtesy of Foreign Military Studies Office.

## Russian Means to Advance National Interests

National interests for 2028 extrapolated from those stated in the 2015 National Security Strategy are:<sup>33</sup>

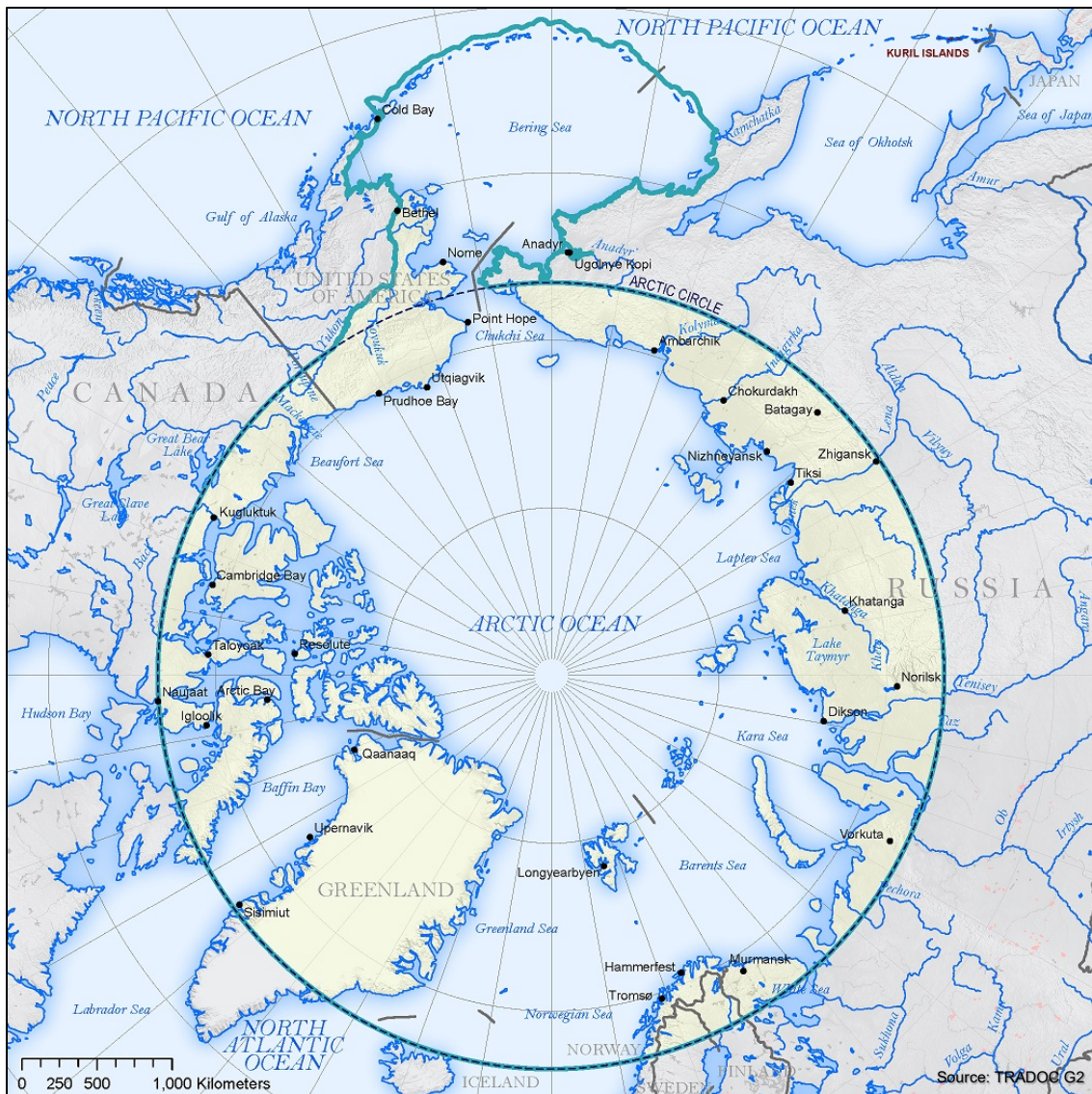
- Consolidation and maintenance of its position as a power in a multipolar world
  - Offset perceived U.S. and Western power through alliances, cooperation, and assistance that competes with US/Western actions
    - Diplomatic actions to establish or reestablish relations and build alliances with nations on the periphery of Russia or that support Russian interests
    - Development or expansion of economic ties with peripheral nations to build both a partnership as well as dependence on Russian resources.
  - Domination of the northern sea route via new military bases to set both economic and physical barriers in the Arctic region
    - Expand and seek to legitimize diplomatic claims in the region
    - Construct supporting infrastructure to take advantage of growing access to the region
    - Deploy forces to establish a security zone on the Arctic border
    - Development of natural resources in the region to reduce or eliminate dependence on external supply
  - Continued expansion of diplomatic, economic, and military influence in regions of the World that provide opportunities to advance strategic goals
    - Acting as a diplomatic power broker to support partners and expand economic and military engagement in target regions
    - Military and security force deployments to conduct peacekeeping and security operations that also supports development of an experienced & professional military with foreign partners
    - Control or disruption of oil and gas production and transit

- Basing and deployment of security, scientific and military forces in target regions
- Economic engagement with target countries to expand markets and reestablish influence in a region.
  - Arms sales (outlet for military-industrial production & upgrades)
  - Infrastructure projects with partner nations to counter China and the US
  - Control or disruption of diamond, natural gas, oil production and/or transit of these resources
  - Manipulation of the illicit drug trade and transit
  - Marketing technical expertise to target nations
- Diplomatic agreements to establish international ports, posts, bases, and space platforms
- Use of Private Military Companies (PMCs) to support partner regimes
- Revitalization of military exchange programs to provide professional training to partner nation military leaders as well as developing foreign operational experience within its own officer corps.
- Development and expansion of regional relationships in the near abroad
  - Economic ties through resource supply (technology, oil & natural gas supplies)
  - Appeals to the Russian Diaspora in peripheral states.
  - Use of non-attribution forces to support national objectives (private military companies – PMC, irregular forces, criminal groups)
  - Provide peacekeeping and diplomatic support to countries in conflict with the West
- Expansion of information dominance
  - Use of commercial media sources in target countries to present and advance Russia's view of world affairs
  - Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), deepfake media, and psychological operations to manipulate world/regional perception of events (Supports reflexive control which is manipulation of a target audience using all forces and means to cause them to select a course of action or make a decision beneficial to Russia)
  - Use of cyber elements to manipulate information flow and conduct espionage to gather technical, financial, and political influence information
  - Continue developing deception forces and means to prevent competitor ISR actions seeking knowledge of Russia's capabilities and strategic intent.
- Federation inviolability ensured by strong defenses
  - High readiness and rapid deployment of a smaller professional military forces
  - Technological advances in quantum computing, AI, man-machine interfaces, automated information and intelligence complexes to support not only direct engagement capabilities but also the speed of command and control
  - Continued research and development of kinetic and non-kinetic standoff weapons
    - Long-range precision strike complexes (Iskandar and cruise missiles)
    - UAV/UGV programs continue to expand and include UCAVs capable of strategic, operational, and tactical level strikes.
    - Electromagnetic Pulse munitions (EMP)
    - Laser complexes capable of destroying or degrading precision or hypersonic weapons, aerospace and space platforms
    - Hypersonic weapons
    - Space-based intelligence and counter-ISR complexes

- Development and application of AI to support military planning and operations
- Pervasive regional information dominance
  - Razvedka (reconnaissance/intelligence/targeting) complexes that are pervasive throughout the Russian forces with integrated networks that populate C2 from the strategic to tactical echelons.
  - Complexes solely focused on denying or facilitating information awareness to US/Western forces (reflexive control)
  - Integrated national and military cyber forces that target financial, transportation, and social networks
  - Continued resourcing and integration of deception (Maskirovka) in all instruments of national power
- Decreasing manpower limitations through development of professional (contract) soldiers and autonomous complexes
  - Autonomous combat complexes that require limited human-in-the-loop intervention.
  - Development and fielding of man-machine interfaces that allows soldiers to direct and control weapons remotely, as dispersed elements or as swarms when needed.
- Reinforce the Kaliningrad Oblast to extend the Russian security zone into the Baltic Sea and northern Europe
- Expanded deployment and use of military security forces and internal security services; Federal Security Service (FSB), military police, National Guard, and special operations forces (SSO).
- Internal stability and security
  - Establishing and reinforcing a strong nationalist cultural ethic
  - Expanded and pervasive internal security forces
  - Information control and manipulation
  - Supportive of benign cultural aspects and suppression of those that oppose the state
  - Increased standard of living and health care for the Russian population
  - Oblast level elections and democratic processes while retaining control of national level leadership positions
  - Engagement of criminal elements to maintain balance; Kleptocracy at the oligarch level while actively suppressing street-level crime and criminal groups.
- National economy that is increasingly competitive
  - Using internal natural resources and seeking control of external resources to assist in controlling world economic activity for Russia's benefit
  - Weaponizing natural resources to pressure or manipulate dependent nations
  - Using irregular forces and means to sabotage or divert financial assets for Russia's benefit or to facilitate engagements with target nations
  - Use of AI to manipulate world markets and financial institutions
  - Information operations focused on manipulation of foreign economies to Russia's advantage
  - Employing technological expertise as marketable resources



## Appendix C – Operational Environment Case Studies



### Arctic 2028 Operational Environment Overview

#### Political

##### ***Cooperative Arbitration of Disputes Using the International System***

Although global strategic politics will manifest and various actors will compete for influence and interest in the Arctic, the Arctic will not be a major source of political tension by 2028. The international system has been sufficient to address disputes and grievances and Arctic stakeholders remain committed to working through established diplomatic channels and international law. The Arctic Council will remain the principal international forum with the eight Arctic nations (Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the U.S.) as members and increasing numbers of observers. The continental shelf dispute over

the central Arctic will likely be resolved, probably in Russia's favor. Russia will increasingly be asserting authority to police and control access to the NSR.

#### Military

##### ***Russian Military Buildup Outpaces Other Arctic Actors***

Russia will have the preponderance of forces and capabilities dominating the Arctic region in 2028, including modernized and specialized formations and equipment specifically designed for that environment. Although Scandinavian countries will have made advances in improving their respective military capabilities and interoperability, Russia will retain overmatch in the Arctic because of technology and manpower. Russian Arctic forces will focus on maintaining credible deterrence through Barents Sea area-based nuclear forces. Russian forces will have expanded military infrastructure and force presence to ensure security along the NSR, with most Arctic ground forces remaining in and around the Kola Peninsula.

#### Economic

##### ***Increased Exploitation of Resources and Trade Routes***

By 2028, the Arctic economy will have grown in importance in proportion to decreases in annual sea ice, which will in turn extend shipping seasons and ease access to natural resources. Although a transpolar sea route (TSR) will likely be very limited or not open by 2028, the NSR's shipping season will have extended and it will remain favored over the Northwest Passage (NWP). Russian domestic shipping will remain the primary maritime activity along the NSR. LNG production is booming. Chinese energy and container traffic will constitute the primary international customer in the NSR. Russia is experimenting with exporting grain to Japan over NSR and this may be well established by 2028. None of the Arctic sea routes will yet surpass the Suez Canal in terms of volume or cost. Arctic fossil fuel exploitation will remain minimal by 2028, because low global prices will not yield sufficient profitability to justify the expenses associated with environmental extremes. However, commercial and government actors (including non-Arctic nations such as China, Western European nations, and select Asian nations) will be preparing for future expansion. Similarly, Arctic fishery reserves will remain untapped although actors will be preparing to stake claims. Russia, specifically, is in the process of increasing fish harvest. Russia is currently expanding legacy efforts to exploit Arctic mineral wealth, including nickel, cobalt, copper, coal, gold, palladium, platinum, and diamonds.

#### Social

##### ***Continued Urbanization and Economic Development Isolates Rural Communities and Erodes Indigenous Culture***

While climate change creates economic opportunity in Arctic region, the combination of receding ice and urbanization will put pressure on indigenous communities and erode indigenous cultures. Population levels are unlikely to have grown significantly by 2028, but an increasing percentage of the population will migrate to and live in urban areas. Cultural assimilation will have increased drastically in Russia, with some resistance in western hemispheric countries. Perceived loss of culture will manifest in the form of increased health and societal problems (e.g., poverty, crime). However, associated grievances are unlikely to result in social unrest or violence.

#### Infrastructure

##### ***Melting permafrost straining Arctic cities; Expansion of maritime infrastructure along NSR***



Infrastructure development will follow economic resources for the foreseeable future. In the short term, maritime port infrastructure will grow fastest of all sectors, with mineral resource extraction growing only as access improves. Costs to maintain and repair infrastructure will increase as permafrost melting continues, weakening and undermining existing structures. The northernmost communities will experience the severest impact. Degradation will result in gradual but significant investment requirements. Russia, which has the largest Arctic population and the most Arctic territory (more than all other countries combined), will experience the greatest economic impact. Diversion of resources to populated areas may slow the development of infrastructure between isolated communities.

#### Information

##### ***Expanded but Still Low Levels of Access to Global Networks***

With the exception of the European Arctic, which is more densely populated with a milder climate, vast distances and extreme conditions between communities will continue to challenge information networks through 2028. Some progress will have been made connecting communities, including satellite internet access, but networks will remain slow and expensive compared to the rest of the world. Television and radio will remain the primary information media in the Russian Arctic but the internet will grow in importance in North American Arctic regions.

#### Physical Environment

##### ***Decrease of Sea Ice & Glaciers, along with Melting of Permafrost***

The Arctic physical environment is changing faster than any other region on Earth because of global warming associated climate change. The Greenland ice sheet is retreating generally but inconsistently. Permafrost is receding in all regions. The Arctic ice sheet will eventually disappear during summer but it is not clear whether that will occur before 2028; as of 2019 September sea ice was declining nearly 13% per decade. Regardless of the extent of the ice sheet, the Arctic maritime environment will remain hazardous because of free-floating icebergs. Boreal forests will advance northward slightly but overall tundra predominate with poor drainage in lowlands. The Atlantic and Pacific coasts have comparatively milder temperatures and greater amounts of snowfall, while continental climates have harsh temperatures and light snowfall. Space support will remain challenging because of lack of geostationary satellite coverage, elevated charged particle levels, and extended periods of darkness.

#### **Russian Exploitation of the Arctic's Strategic Conditions**

##### ***Capitalizing on Arctic Economic Deficits to exploit and control resources***

Climate change is increasing the economic and geostrategic importance of the Arctic. Russia is anticipating emerging economic opportunities that will be created by receding Arctic ice. To access the Arctic seas, as of 2019, Russia already had a polar ice breaker fleet that outnumbered the rest of the world's combined fleets, and may have another eight operational by 2028. This is consistent with Russian strategy of being present, especially with its equipment, in areas it wants to influence and control. Furthermore, Russia is enabling economic leverage by modernizing ports along the Arctic coast, with plans to open a new port by the mid-2020s.

##### ***Maneuvering physically and cognitively to ensure information dominance over the Arctic***

Russia is establishing information dominance to provide situational awareness, communication, and targeting for the military and to facilitate narrative control over Arctic rights and exclusivity. Physical measures include expanding satellite coverage, with an additional 12 Earth-imaging satellites dedicated to Arctic surveillance planned to be in orbit during the next decade. Improved satellite coverage will have dual applications for military and civilian applications. Moreover, Russian media continues to advance the narrative of Russian Arctic legacy and supremacy. Simultaneously, Russia has been conducting scientific studies of the Arctic basin (supported by its information architecture) to legitimize claims before international bodies that the Lomonosov ridge is connected to Russia's continental shelf. If ultimately accepted by the international community, this would enable Russia to extend economic exclusivity to central Arctic natural resources.

### ***Leveraging geographic positional advantage in a difficult environment to project Arctic supremacy***

In addition to having military forces and a plethora of equipment and infrastructure positioned in the Arctic, Russia has been improving forces for Arctic operations through modernization and technological investment. Military improvements range from investment in bases to support long-range aircraft operations and coastal patrols, advancing drone and robotics technology for Arctic operations, upgrading air and missile defense, and training forces extensively to operate in the region. However, deception remains a tenet of Russian warfare doctrine, and it is likely that Arctic capabilities are exaggerated as a component of Russia's larger information warfare strategy and efforts to counter NATO, which Russia perceives as a threat. What capabilities are being improved are likely primarily focused on improving capability to protect growing economic interests in the Russian Arctic rather than to project power.

### **General Implications**

Russia has the most Arctic territory and largest number people living in the Arctic of any nation. Russia also has as many if not more national interests in the Arctic than any other country. For the foreseeable future, Russia will have a louder voice in Arctic international affairs than any other individual country and, frequently, a louder voice than all other countries combined. It will have better capability to exploit increasingly lucrative resources and the intent to do so. Although the Arctic is important to Russia, Arctic influence is only one component and is fully nested within Russia's broader strategies and interests. Russia will employ all instruments of national power to advance its interests in the Arctic, preferring information, intelligence, and diplomatic power. Russia will wield military, law enforcement, financial, and economic power as needed, but primarily in support of the other instruments.



## Central African Republic 2028 Operational Environment Overview

### Political

#### ***Continued instability, foreign dependency, and mass population displacement***

Political instability and mass displacement of people due to violence between armed groups and the government has continued into 2028. Neither the CAR government nor the ongoing 2014-established United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) peacekeeping mission have the capacity to effectively protect citizens in the areas controlled by armed groups.<sup>34</sup> The future funding of MINUSCA is threatened as slow progress, corruption, and inefficiencies in the operation discourage donor nations and other institutions from contributing.<sup>35</sup> Without evidence of progress, MINUSCA will face severe reduction in funding or complete elimination by 2028. Political parties are legal, but party

members are subject to intimidation, harassment, and violence—particularly in areas not controlled by the government. Corruption is endemic and civil society groups have little influence. Citizens who live outside the capital have limited access to their elected officials.<sup>36</sup> The CAR government is dependent on international peacekeeping forces.<sup>37</sup>

#### Military

##### ***Non-distributed and weak military dependent on foreign military assistance***

The CAR military, geographically focused primarily in the capital Bangui in order to protect the existing regime, is ill-equipped, poorly trained, and subject to UN arms sanctions.<sup>38</sup> It will continue into 2028 to be heavily dependent on foreign assistance. Ongoing attempts to create power-sharing agreements and satisfying the demands of the armed groups who control large areas of the CAR continue to be unsuccessful, leaving large portions of the country outside of the government's influence.<sup>39</sup> Attempts to create a multiethnic and inclusive military—needed to integrate rebel forces into the government security apparatus—create larger tensions and apprehensions between a fragile government and a larger and more diverse military. The CAR government has reason to fear a powerful military institution due to its long history that includes coup d'états, rebellions, and mutinies staged with the help of a dissatisfied military.<sup>40</sup>

#### Economic

##### ***The CAR's economic outlook is highly dependent on security***

The CAR economy is constrained by a landlocked geography, a poor transportation system, a largely unskilled work force, corruption, and a history of poor macroeconomic policies. In 2028, the economy continues to be further hurt by factional fighting between the government and armed groups across large portions of the country. These violent disputes make economic development and investment difficult. Large population displacements due to violence and instability have created an environment where subsistence farmers are unable to survive without the infusion of international assistance. Food security and recovery of the agricultural sector, the largest in the country, is hindered when instability prevents farmers from tending their fields. Following trends over the last several decades, in 2028 roughly 80 percent of the CAR's population lives below the international poverty line. The CAR's current human development ranking of 188th out of 189 countries, continues. These severe obstacles to economic prosperity for the vast majority of the CAR citizens will not be overcome by 2028 and are likely to worsen. Even if the internal security situation improves the country still faces a weak and subsistence economy. Lack of supporting financial and legal infrastructure and a largely uneducated population will delay and degrade economic advances.<sup>41</sup>

#### Social

##### ***Large population displacement and targeted violence disrupt families and communities***

The CAR has seen tens of thousands of its people displaced because of violence. The repercussions of such large-scale displacement affect the fabric of the CAR's society, and will impact the nation's development for decades into the future. Conditions for internally displaced persons and refugees remain harsh, with many having no access to humanitarian assistance. Overall estimates for the total country indicate that 2.5 million people, out of a population of 4.6 million, need humanitarian assistance. Displaced people, languishing in displacement camps without economic possibilities, will be an increasingly larger percent of those in need of aid. International funding continues to fall far short of the requirements. The large-scale displacements have facilitated the use of child soldiers by multiple rebel factions, creating a key

obstacle in coming to a full reconciliation of the CAR's society. Even when civilians are able to return to their homes, armed groups still impact their lives—contributing to continued poverty and the disruption of normal social interactions.<sup>42</sup>

#### Infrastructure

##### ***Infrastructure development constrained by poor management***

Infrastructure in the CAR continues to be poorly developed and maintained in 2028. Roughly 10 percent of the population, mainly in the capital of Bangui, has access to electricity. Corruption among government officials constrains development of economy boosting natural resources, such as diamonds and gold, that could bring greater prosperity to the country. Transport, water, power, and Information and communications technology infrastructure within the CAR have seen some increased investment; however, its annual investment continues to fall far short of the World Bank estimated need of the sustained expenditure required to address the challenges that remain.<sup>43</sup>

#### Information

##### ***Perception and Reality Differ Based upon Source***

In the years prior to 2028, the government's ability to influence a large portion of the population will continue to be severely limited by the lack of communication systems, infrastructure, and credibility. Significant areas of the country continue to be subject to the influence of local and regional armed groups and ethnic and religious leaders. Displaced populations rely on inaccurate and inadequate information from sources, often individuals, which they perceive as credible. Rumors and word-of-mouth are the means individuals use to build their perception of reality. The information infrastructure will make significant progress in the form of limited cellular service and smart phones; however, the government will still lack credibility, which contributes to continued confusion and conflict in an already volatile environment. Tensions between communities will increase as malign actors exploit the information environment for their own self-interest.

#### Physical Environment

##### ***Failing infrastructure leads to increased damage from natural disasters***

By 2028, the CAR will still not be equipped to handle major natural disasters. Torrential rains in October 2019 caused major flooding as water from the country's major river, the Ubangi, overflowed its banks and filled tributaries with more water than they could handle. This once in a decade event destroyed homes and left at least 28,000 people homeless. Over the next decades, these inevitable natural and catastrophic events will strain the capacity of the government to deal with the immediate needs of victims, much less move forward with the longer-term requirements for reconstituting the country after a disaster. Due to investments in security as well as corruption within the government, the needed infrastructure to withstand these natural events will not be in place. The CAR's capacity to manage natural disasters is heavily dependent on international aid that will not be enough to meet the needs. The government's incapacity to support the demands of victims will further erode citizen confidence in the government and give leverage to opposition and anti-government factions.<sup>44</sup>



## **Russian Exploitation of CAR's Strategic Conditions**

### ***Russia will leverage weapons sales as an entry point***

Embargoes against arms sales to the CAR have restricted its ability to build and resource its security forces. Russia's growing influence in the country began in 2017, when it received an exemption to the UN arms embargo—allowing the CAR to purchase a modest quantity of light arms. Moscow exploited this foothold to expand its military and security presence there, primarily at France's expense. Over the last decade and a half, Russia has continued to increase the number of civilian and military trainers it sends to the CAR. With the CAR's volatile nature and the government's fragile hold on the country, Russia positions itself as a welcome ally in the fight to gain control of territory held by armed groups. Over the next decades, Russia will accept the invitation of the CAR's government to build secure bases from which to house its military advisors and trainers and protect its growing economic interests in the CAR.<sup>45</sup>

### ***Exploitation of natural resources***

Russia has its eyes on ways in which to exploit the natural resources of the CAR. Its representatives have struck deals with the government to mine diamonds where the trade is legal and with warlords where it is not. By 2028, Russian companies, with the assistance of Russian security assets are actively operating and exploiting the extraction of natural resources of interest to Russia—to include oil, diamonds, gold and uranium. Russia will have negotiated favorable agreements that also facilitate the CAR government corruption and relationships with armed groups who control areas where the resources reside.<sup>46</sup>

Russia's entry into the CAR is not without complexities and challenges. It has already faced setbacks in other areas of Africa. Members of the Russian state-backed Wagner Group suffered eleven killed, with several beheaded, and twenty-five wounded in fights with jihadist extremists in Mozambique in November 2019.<sup>47</sup> Facing disparate and multiple armed groups, a poverty-ridden population, and a fragile CAR government, Russia will inevitably make enemies as it supports some groups over others. Protecting its growing interests will come with a significant cost.

### ***Russian narrative as a world power***

Russia's relatively small investment in the CAR contributes to its larger narrative of being a power broker on the world stage. Russia can lay claim to a major role in the peace and stability process in volatile CAR while, at the same time, benefiting from the sale of arms and other security products and the exploitation of the CAR's natural resources for its own profit. The CAR government, suspicious of the West, is willing to strengthen ties with Russia, whose less rigid stance on human rights and willingness to supply needed support to its military is welcomed.<sup>48</sup>

## **General Implications**

Russia cannot compete with the United States, and especially China, in economic terms. Russia is a relative newcomer to Africa, in spite of a significant Soviet Union presence there. With money to invest, Russia is consigned to moving into areas where U.S. and Chinese presence is minimal. Because of this, Russia will be selective and opportunistic in its investing. Russia's willingness to

provide weapons in larger numbers than the West, as well as Russian military advisors and trainers to the CAR will increase Russian influence there. Russia leverages its relationship with the CAR to weaken any U.S. and Western influence in this state. Russia's surge of advisors and delivery of weapons to the CAR beginning in 2017 is already displacing France's traditional role in the country. Russia's use of private military companies in the CAR that are nominally not under the control of the Russian government, provide deniability of Russian responsibility or culpability when abuses or other negative events happen. The CAR's openness to a military base, as expressed by its president at a recent Russia-Africa Summit, is an indicator that Russia is being welcomed into the country.

Central African Republic is rich in several natural resources that Russia would like to exploit. Providing security, industry expertise, and equipment through both Russian military advisors and industry experts, will garner the CAR's loyalty and allow Russia to further project its influence into Africa. Increasing the CAR's capacity to extract and sell its natural resources in ways it cannot at present will make Russia a welcome partner. Russia's looser adherence to human rights and trade regulations will also be inviting to a fragile the CAR government. This allows Russia an opportunity to shape economic agreements which both bolster its influence and weakens Western influence in the CAR.



## India 2028 Operational Environment Overview

### Political

#### ***The Indian political system homogenizes, streamlines, and possibly radicalizes***

The slow, chaotic characterized by caste-domination agglomeration of political parties that emerged following the breakdown of the old *de facto* single party system in the 1990s may coalesce by 2028. Voters will increasingly vote for national political parties over their respective caste politicians. This will likely cause rapid consolidation of political parties and ease political gridlock, making it simpler for Indian politicians to develop a coherent strategy for greater participation in the global political landscape. Larger and more powerful political parties, however, may set conditions for increased radicalization.

## Military

### ***The Indian military modernizes, breaks up the “Big Army,” and pursues a true joint force***

With its greatest threats confined to powerful neighbors with which it shares land borders (Pakistan and China), the Indian military was traditionally dominated by the Indian Army. Proportionally meagre defense spending and massive pension requirements largely curtailed both modernization and maintenance, to the point where India’s joint capabilities have eroded significantly compared to both their neighbors and their global competitors. With the United States, Russia, and China all interested in building a useful military partnership – and with significant sustained economic growth in the future – India is in a position to substantially reform and modernize its military in order to meaningfully project power throughout the Indo-Pacific region while maintaining its traditional deterrence role against land threats over the next 15 years.

## Economic

### ***Growth into an economic superpower – punctuated by uncertainty***

Projections for India’s economic future vary significantly. The massive growth of the past two decades appears to be slowing, or at least becoming more erratic, but population growth – one of the biggest drivers of Indian economic growth – continues to be relentless. Even conservative estimates project India replacing the U.K. and France in the top-5 largest economies in the world this decade, and approaching a possible displacement of Japan in the top-3 by 2028. This growth may enable substantial investment in military and infrastructure, but sizable variance in year-to-year growth numbers adds significant uncertainty to planning and budgeting processes, making long-term projects more difficult.

## Social

### ***India will decide on the future of its caste system and its secular government***

While the Indian government continues programs of affirmative action intended to reverse some of the long-standing biases of the caste system, the Indian population at large – particularly the wealthy and influential members of the upper castes – have yet to fully embrace the idea of a casteless society. With the changes happening in Indian politics, however, a more serious and consequential effort to eliminate the caste system may occur in the near future. In much the same vein, a growing movement aimed at giving Hindus a preferential place in Indian society is likely to force the Indian government to choose between maintaining its status as a secular entity and something of a lightweight theocracy. Politicians will be faced with choosing between platforms that ensure minority rights are protected, or catering to a growing contingent seeking a privileged legal position for the Hindu majority in Indian society.

## Infrastructure

### ***Infrastructure continues to be a massive economic lynchpin, but consistently lags behind demand***

By 2028, India’s infrastructure needs will continue to be colossal, representing the second-largest component of its economy behind only construction. The Indian government’s difficulties with legislative gridlock, however, coupled with a highly-centralized federal system, make planning and executing large infrastructure projects difficult. As a result, for much of post-colonial India’s history, infrastructure projects tended to be completed slowly and in a piecemeal fashion. Bigger budgets, greater cohesion in the government, and more effective long-term planning are beginning to overcome these issues and streamline both public and private infrastructure projects. Even with these improvements, however, India’s meteoric population growth will seriously stress both existing and legacy infrastructure. Power generation, water – particularly for

irrigation – and road systems, are all inadequate to meet projected needs. Consequently, India will increasingly look to foreign countries and companies to help meet its growing infrastructure requirements, and infrastructure construction projects represent one of the most attractive foreign investment options in India.

Information

***India's global information influence becomes immense***

India is already the world's largest free media market, and sits only behind China when it comes to number of mobile device users and India's information environment remains largely free and widely accessible. This massive domestic market – and its growing buying power – suggest that Indian media influence is set to increase dramatically. It remains to be seen if India can make significant inroads into the highly competitive global media market, however. India's tech industry remains relatively primitive compared to the US, South Korea, Japan, China, and the EU, but huge numbers of well-trained and well-educated Indian engineers coupled with a major government push to build a viable domestic tech industry may prove fruitful by 2028. These factors together suggest that India may be in a position to dramatically increase their global influence in the information environment, especially with a revitalized tech industry largely supported by their huge domestic market.

### **Russian Exploitation of India's Strategic Conditions**

***Coming in as a Fresh Face to Grow Partnerships and Influence in the East***

Russia, China, and the United States all view India as something of a free agent in the diplomatic sphere. Though a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, India does not have any formal military allies. As an emerging superpower, India's potential economic and military strength – plus its valuable strategic location – make it a very attractive partner for friendship, cooperation, and potential formal alliance. A formal partnership of some kind with Russia has some significant appeal for Indians as well: it would immediately offset both Chinese and American influence in the region, creating essentially a third party with at least equal military and diplomatic power. Furthermore, it would help to bolster the growing economic ties between the two countries. While a formal military alliance between the two nations is highly unlikely, a strategic partnership arrangement – formal economic cooperation, an expansion of military cooperation and technology sharing, or a loose political alliance – represent a potentially ideal compromise.

***Using Foreign Military Sales to Grow Influence (and Profit)***

The Russian military is largely dependent on funds generated by foreign military sales to reinforce its budget, and India is its largest customer. The T-90S main battle tank, the S-400 surface-to-air missile system, the *INS Vikramaditya* aircraft carrier, and the Ka-226 helicopter are only four of several major Russian weapon systems purchased by India. These sales, however, are lagging somewhat, due both to reductions in Indian military spending and competition from other exporters, particularly China. India's probable upcoming military reform and expansion will provide Russia with an ideal avenue to reinvigorate its military export industry. In addition, India is looking to expand its own domestic military industrial base. Russia can leverage this need as an additional opportunity for influence masked as cooperation, in addition to increasing the relationship with simple military sales. Russia and India have already collaborated on several



high-profile acquisition programs, including the Su-30MKI and HAL FGFA fighter aircraft and the BrahMos anti-ship missile. Programs like this are appealing to India and Russia is the main beneficiary. Russia is paid well for licenses and royalties, India develops its domestic defense industry, and both sides enjoy updated weapons systems.

### ***Providing Energy Infrastructure Investment to Supplant Legacy Partners***

India projects to surpass China in net energy deficit sometime in the next decade. While oil and natural gas imports remain the primary means of meeting this deficit, the Indian government is enthusiastically looking for different energy production alternatives, with a focus on expanding domestic production as much as possible. While Russia is more than happy to sell oil and gas mined from its eastern fields – so much so that a potential \$25 billion pipeline is rumored to be in the works – it is also eager to participate in domestic Indian energy infrastructure projects. The most prominent among these is a new generation of massive nuclear power plants built to Russian plans and built jointly by Indian and Russian construction companies. This represents India's largest-ever infrastructure program, as well as Russia's largest-ever construction project on foreign soil. Successful cooperative partnerships will likely entrench Russia as India's go-to partner for domestic infrastructure projects, ahead of traditional partners France and Japan, and new competitor, China.

### **General Implications**

India's global power is undoubtedly rising. As a result, great competitors like Russia and others are watching and waiting to strike. Russia may well consider a meaningful strategic partnership with India to be a crown jewel of its new-era diplomacy. Not only would this provide a massive export market and strong military partner for Russia, but it would dramatically undermine high-profile Chinese and American efforts at courting India. Russia is in a strong position to develop this relationship: its traditional military partnership, emerging commercial partnerships, and historic diplomatic ties may well make them the most appealing long-term partner option for India.



## Iran 2028 Operational Environment Overview

### Political

#### ***Iran is striving to reclaim legacy greatness despite U.S.-led Western opposition***

In 2028, Iran's pursuit of Great Power status and regional hegemony continues to be shaped by the concept of *Iranzamin*, or Greater Iran, which encompasses the lands once ruled by the Persian Empire.<sup>vii</sup> Iran does not seek to reclaim this territory, but instead sees influence in these areas as its historic right.<sup>49</sup> Iran seeks to increase its international standing and integrate into the global economy in spite of sanctions while simultaneously increasing its ability to exert influence

<sup>vii</sup> *Iranzamin* covers much of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, eastern Iraq, southern Turkmenistan, western Afghanistan, Pakistani Baluchistan, and the Gulf Islands, including Bahrain. It is no coincidence that most of this territory, with the exception of Armenia, have large Shia populations.

in depth to offset the political, military, economic, and religious influence of competitors, specifically the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. Both Iran and the United States see influence in the Middle East as a zero-sum between them.

Iran has been a theocracy since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, with power held by the Supreme Leader and the theocrats who appoint and advise him. The people elect a president, an Assembly of Experts, and a parliament. As all candidates are vetted by the Guardian Council, another hardliner institution overseen by the Supreme Leader, the oft-used labels of 'reformers,' 'moderates,' and 'conservatives' in Iranian politics describe minor variations of what most Westerners would still consider conservatives.<sup>50</sup>

The regime extensively and harshly targets its political opposition at home and abroad. Protests against poor economic conditions and for democratic reforms between 2009 and 2020 signaled a portion of the population is dissatisfied enough to risk their personal security. These protests were harshly suppressed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) (see Military, below), and it is unlikely that they will become widespread and organized enough by 2028 to foment a second revolution. The IRGC is the key supporting organ of the Supreme Leader, and wields political and economic power as well as a military power.<sup>51</sup> It is largely considered by urban, educated and young populations as a tool of the theocracy to "securitize the country and curtail political reform."<sup>52</sup>

Iran's pariah status prior to 2028 depends primarily on the attitude of successive U.S. administrations and whether or not the United States can convince the European signatories of the JCPOA to force a new nuclear arms deal. Significant change in regime behavior concerning its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs as well as its support for terrorism and other proxies must be forthcoming for the United States or the international community to provide sanctions relief. This will be difficult with a hardliner government in place and the IRGC embedded so deeply in the political and economic fabric of the Islamic Republic.<sup>53</sup>

#### Military

##### ***The IRGC and its Qods Force have influence throughout the region and within the theocracy***

Iran has a dual military structure of the regular military (*Artesh*) and the IRGC, both of which have ground, air, naval, and missile components. The IRGC was created by Ayatollah Khomeini in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution as a counter to the *Artesh*, which is a carryover from the Pahlavi Dynasty. The IRGC is described in the Iranian constitution as the "guardian of the Revolution" from both external and internal threats. Technically under the IRGC, the Qods Force, equivalent to the U.S. Army Special Forces, operates semi-autonomously and takes its direction from the Supreme Leader. The United States declared the IRGC a terrorist organization in 2019.<sup>54</sup> Since the Iran-Iraq War, Iran has "doctrinally linked conventional warfare, economic warfare, cyber warfare, information operations, intelligence operations, and other activities seamlessly in an effort to undermine U.S. national security objectives and the objectives of U.S. allies alike."<sup>55</sup> Many of Iran's non-conventional capabilities fall under the IRGC and the Qods Force, including sponsorship of proxies, hostage taking, assassinations, cyber intrusion and attacks (particularly of rival economic systems), fast-attack speedboats swarms, drones, and, barring drastic internal or external action by 2028, nuclear weapons. Iran employs these capabilities to leverage rivals' weaknesses socially, politically, economically and militarily through

successive or simultaneous attacks or threats up to the threshold of open armed conflict. Iran's intent is to extend its regional influence, exert pressure to extract concessions and sanctions relief, counter Saudi Arabia, threaten Israel, and control territory through proxies. However, this brinksmanship strategy may not hold if internal stability is threatened and/or external pressures are such that the regime needs a realized common foe as a popular unifier or it perceives that concessions can be gained to provide relief from sanctions and other international pressures.<sup>56</sup>

#### Economic

##### ***The regime blames the United States for its economic woes, but the people blame the regime***

Iran's economy is heavily dependent on petrochemical production, and suffers from economic mismanagement, Lack of commercial law, insufficient trade infrastructure, lack of economic diversity, and limited access to finance for small business. At one time the second largest economy in the Middle East, Iran's economy has been crippled by U.S. and international sanctions. Additional sanctions imposed after the United States withdrew from the JCPOA in 2019 drastically de-valued the rial, caused European investors to withdraw from the country and immediately reduced Iranian oil exports by 50 percent at a loss of approximately \$10 billion in revenue. Depending on fluctuations in the world oil market, licit Iranian oil exports could cease in part or entirely before 2028 if there is no relief from sanctions. Since 2011 Iran's trade has been less than 50 percent of GDP, and sanctions have forced it to trade with Russia, China and North Korea.<sup>viii</sup> Inflation in 2019 was 42 percent and continues to rise without sanctions relief. Unemployment of male youth (ages 15-24) is more than 28 percent, which accounts for about two percent (>1.6m) of the total population of over 83 million. These economic conditions are a major cause of continued popular protests, resulting in thousands of arrests and hundreds of deaths at the hands of regime security forces. Unemployed military age males, while a small number overall, constitute a potential threat if organized against the regime.<sup>57</sup>

Continued sanctions and rising inflation increase Iran's illicit economy with Russia, China, North Korea, and malign actors around the world. Iran is both a purveyor and customer of weapons proliferation, including weapons of mass effect, bringing hundreds of millions of dollars into Iran, much coming through Quds Force front companies.<sup>58</sup> The IRGC and Quds Force use ties to Middle East and Latin America drug and criminal networks as means to offset sanctions and to facilitate external operations. Language in U.S. sanctions require Iran to repudiate a myriad of illicit activities, not just nuclear weapon and missile development, as the precondition for sanctions to be modified. As a result, U.S. administrations cannot arbitrarily remove or reduce the sanctions without Congressional or Iranian action, and so they are likely to remain in effect long-term. As the Iranian economy continues to decline under sanctions, Iranian illicit activities will grow and diversify.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>viii</sup> Iran is one of China's main energy suppliers, selling them "between US\$1 million and US\$3 million in crude oil monthly" in 2019. Source: Mira Milosevich, "The 2010s: "Grand Strategy" or Tactical Opportunism?" *The Role of Russia in the Middle East and North Africa Region. Strategy or Opportunism?* Valeria Talbot and Chiara Lovotti, Eds, EuroMeSCo Joint Policy Study12, Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean, April 2019, 43

## Social

### ***The heart of the Shia (Islamic) faith is persecuted by Sunnis and their Western Allies (and repressed by the regime)***

Just over half of the Iranian population is Persian, twice as many as the next largest ethnic group, the Azerbaijanis. Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen and several other groups comprise the rest of the population. These ethnicities are determined by language, rather than by genetics, as has been the custom since the 1930s.<sup>60</sup> Close to 90 percent of the Iranian population is Shia, with nearly ten percent Sunni and one percent Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian and Baha'i. As home to the largest Shia population in the world, Iran is a prime antagonist in the Sunni-Shia divide, referred to by some as the Muslim Civil War. Iran considers itself to be the preeminent Islamic power in the world and not merely a Shia power - from Iran's perspective, it is the Sunnis who split from the true faith.<sup>61</sup> Iran's Shia theocrats "perceive themselves and their co-religionists as targets of intolerant Sunnis"<sup>62</sup> and that "the West seeks not only to defeat the Islamic Republic militarily but also to infiltrate the country with foreign values that subvert the culture and faith of the Islamic Revolution. In this sense, the mullahs regard their conflict with the West as a struggle for the hearts and minds of the Muslim world."<sup>63</sup> This explains why Iran continues to make transactional relationships of convenience with Sunni countries (e.g., Syria, Egypt) and groups (e.g., Al Qaeda, Taliban, Muslim Brotherhood) to further their mutual fight against the West and the United States in particular.<sup>64</sup> While not openly admitted, these relationships show that the regime can be pragmatic in pursuit of its strategic objectives.

The regime wields influence on all aspects of life in Iran, and continues a long history of human rights abuses focused on maintaining that control. Examples include: torture and mutilation of prisoners; jailing of journalists, political activists, human rights advocates, and dual-citizens; lack of due process; widespread discrimination against women and ethnic and religious minorities; lethal persecution of homosexuals; suppression of free speech, assembly, and a free press; and widespread voting irregularities.<sup>65</sup>

## Information

### ***The regime seeks internal control and external influence in the information environment***

Iran has attempted to control its information environment for decades. Iran strictly regulates internet providers, enforces internet speed limits and has demonstrated the ability to disable social media and messaging platforms. Cyber activities are consolidated under the Supreme Cyberspace Council and the IRGC to defend against social media movements similar to the Arab Spring and cyber-attacks like the Stuxnet attacks on Iranian nuclear efforts. The regime employs an extensive censorship and surveillance apparatus, which blocks access to traditional media, social media sites, and general online content, jams foreign satellite broadcasts, monitors online behavior, and hacks the accounts of political dissidents.<sup>66</sup> Iran launched its "24-hour English-language *Press TV* in 2007... [to] defend Iran's policies and those of its allies, while criticizing Western policies... [and] questioning the basic international norms of political and human rights."<sup>67</sup> Iran uses social media as an instrument of influence, both domestically and internationally against political opposition and to spread pro-regime propaganda. The majority of Iranian online influence, access, and attack activities have focused on its Middle Eastern rivals and neighbors, but by 2028 US-led pressures have led to increased cyber and information targeting of the US, while the Islamic Republic continues to increase its capability and capacity.<sup>68</sup>



## Infrastructure

### ***Outdated and underdeveloped, but connected, and fellow revisionist regimes are investing***

Since 2013, the regime and the Iranian private sector have invested tens of billions of dollars on infrastructure.<sup>69</sup> The entire population has access to electricity, mostly generated from fossil fuels. Russia helped Iran to build the region's only nuclear power plant, Bushehr, partially fueled by Russian uranium, and by 2028 Russia will have built or be building, several more.<sup>70</sup> Cellular access is near 100 percent, and by 2028 5G (or its successor) may cover the country.<sup>71</sup> Water and sanitation infrastructure is generally good.<sup>72</sup> Iran's oil and gas infrastructure is out of date and limited by U.S. sanctions, but by 2028 Russia will have invested up to US\$50 billion in Iran's oil and gas sector since 2006.<sup>73</sup> Iran has partnered with China and Russia to update and expand its rail networks. By 2028, rail networks may connect provincial capitals to Tehran, stretch from Turkmenistan and Afghanistan to the Persian Gulf, and connect the Islamic Republic to Turkey and from there to Europe. While this investment has made improvements, sanctions continue to ensure that Iran's infrastructure modernization will not be close to complete by 2028.<sup>74</sup>

## Physical Terrain

### ***Strategically located and resource-laden***

Iran is strategically located in the midst of an oil and gas-rich region, stretching from the Caspian Sea in the north to the Persian Gulf in the southwest and the Arabian Sea to the south. These bodies of water hold, and are adjacent to, significant oil and gas reserves and therefore are crucial shipping routes for a large percentage of the world's raw oil and gas. Iran is one of the largest oil producers in the world, with over 70 percent of its exports going to East Asia. Its location, oil fields, and production give it significant leverage with oil consumers and regulating oil prices. However, development of eastern Mediterranean gas fields and the burgeoning Chinese fracking industry could provide enough competition in the future to devastate the Iranian export economy, even without sanctions.<sup>75</sup>

The heartland of Iran is a large plateau defined in the north by the Alburz Mountains and to the southwest and south by the Zagros Mountains. The terrain of the plateau is widely varied, including deserts, lush arable land, and hilly regions. Iran shares 4,400 KM of land borders with Iraq, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, much of which is aligned along natural features. Iran borders the South Caucasus, which Russia has long considered as part of its 'near abroad.' Iran and Russia continue to dispute access rights to Caspian gas fields. Despite this ongoing quarrel and although Azerbaijan is a majority Shia country and Azerbaijanis are Iran's second largest ethnic group, Iran does not generally interfere in Russia's 'near abroad.'<sup>76</sup>

## **Russian Exploitation of Iran's Strategic Conditions**

Russia employs an all-of-nation approach to competition and conflict that spans the operational variables. In the Middle East, Russia primarily employs diplomatic and economic methods, supported by information warfare. Russian military activities in the region support its diplomatic efforts to gain advantage, as well as positioning for a potential future military advantage.<sup>77</sup>

### ***Pragmatic Foreign Policy: Give a Little to Get More***

Russia and Iran both have similar objectives in the Middle East: expand their influence, reduce the influence of the US, and stay below the threshold of armed conflict with the United States and

the West. Russia and Iran cooperate well when each other's interests coincide, but that does not equate to a shared vision of the region. Russian interests are much broader than Iran's regional interests, requiring a working relationship with the United States and other regional actors as possible to realize its objectives. Iran and Syria have been Russia's primary Middle East partners for decades, causing resentment within Russian and Middle Eastern Sunni populations, especially after the Russian intervention in Syria. Iran and Russia both fear the rise of pan-Sunni elements that could be bolstered if the Assad regime falls, which would cause Iran to lose its northern 'Shia corridor' and Russia to lose the use of its Syrian seaport and air base. To mitigate potential Russian Sunni radicalization and gain influence across the region, Putin seeks expanded ties with Sunni countries and maintains a long-term relationship with Israel. Due to its lack of preconditions and transactional/contractual partnerships, Russia is successful in building relationships with diverse partners that may be antagonistic to each other. In this way, Russia is friendly with virtually every actor of consequence in the region, and presents itself as a viable alternative to the United States, while leveraging these relationships against one another and the United States to gain advantages (e.g., Russia uses its relationships with the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel to pressure Iran and vice versa). Russia uses its ability to influence UN sanctions, geographic proximity, and advanced weapons technology to gain Iranian cooperation, as Iran's isolation presents little choice in its partners. In return Russia gains access to military ports and bases in Syria and Iran itself. Added to Russian bases in the Caucasus and potentially in North Africa, this offsets U.S. capabilities and enables Russia to pressure regional and great powers alike with threats to energy supplies and major lines of communication. Russia has advised the Iranian military in Syria on conventional tactics to add to its foreign deployment capabilities, which provides Russia with a capable and interoperable partner in the region. Further, Russia is adopting tactics developed by Iran for its anti-state militia proxies across the region. Iranian cooperation in Syria has enhanced Russia's combat capability and status as a mediator of the conflict through the Astana Process, effectively setting up Russia as a potential mediation authority in the region over the US.<sup>78</sup>

### ***Enabling Nuclear Technology to Gain Influence***

Moscow contributed to Iran's nuclear power program to gain influence over the program through creating Iranian dependency on fuel and technical assistance for the Russian-built Bushehr reactor, and to gain the opportunity for Russian leadership of international efforts to control the program. However, Iran constructed its own nuclear sites, which it used as leverage over Russia, the US, EU, etc. Regardless, Russia gained international prestige and secured a prominent seat at the table for international efforts to control the Iranian nuclear program.<sup>79</sup>

### ***Creating Armed Dependency***

Russia uses arms sales as a foreign policy tool to create dependencies while also creating interoperability with the Russian military that could be leveraged in the future. Iran's economic isolation due to sanctions and arms embargoes, coupled with geographic proximity, make Russia one of Iran's primary trade partners, especially in arms. MENA countries account for over 35 percent of Russia's defense business,<sup>80</sup> and with "embargoes banning EU and U.S. weapons sales to Iran, Russia has become Iran's main arms supplier. [Between 2008 and 2018], two-thirds of Iranian defense imports came from Russia,"<sup>81</sup> and this trend continues through 2028. Russia desperately needs this trade, as Western and international sanctions are depressing its economy.

Russia uses Iranian dependence in its arms sales to gain sway with Israel, among other Middle Eastern states, by freezing arms sales in return for concessions.<sup>82</sup>

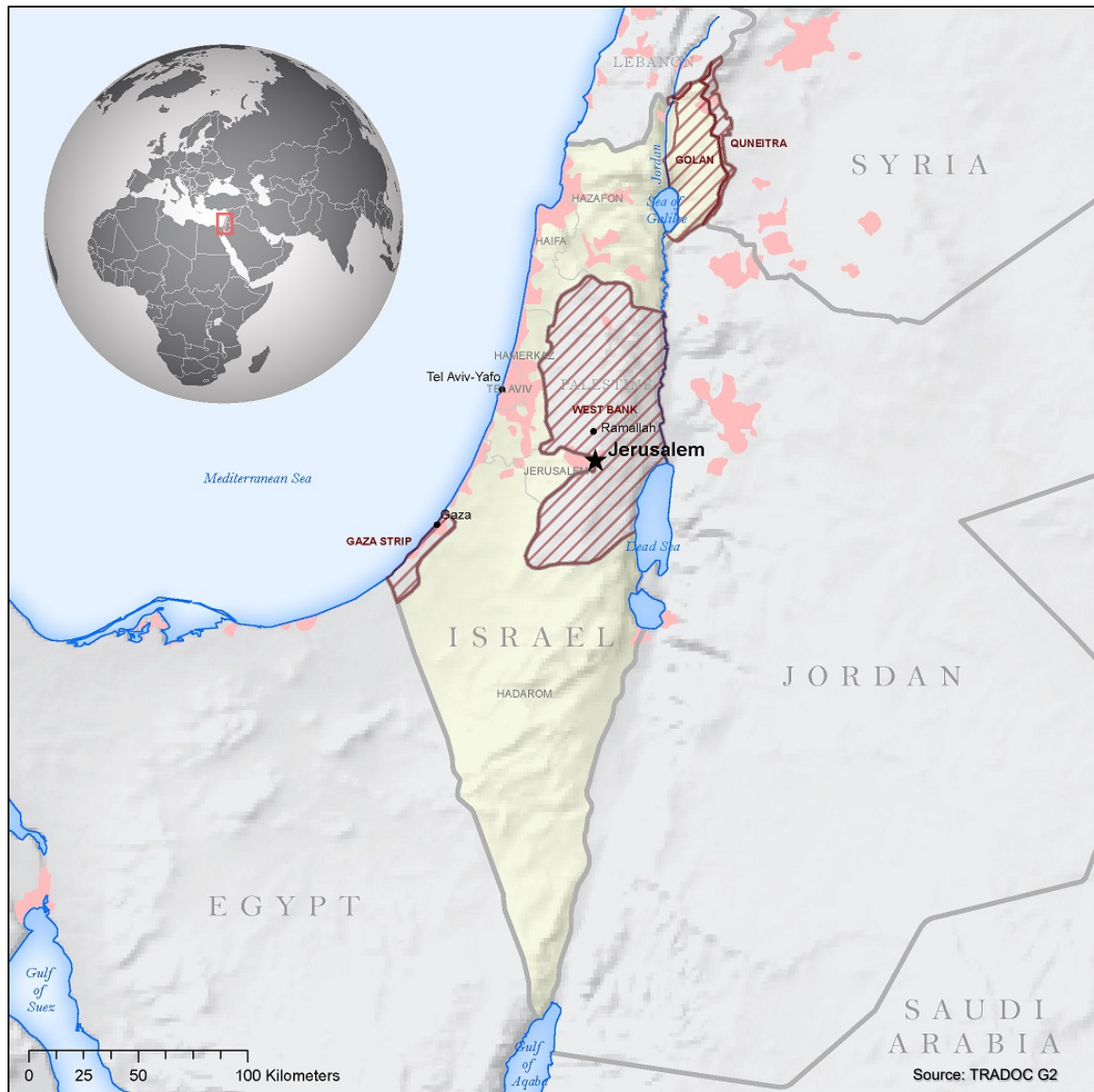
### ***Energy Diplomacy and Coercion***

Competition over fossil fuels remains an ongoing issue between states that rely on fossil fuel production for their GDP, such as Russia and Iran, and states that rely on others for their fossil fuels. Russia uses energy projects as a tool of foreign policy to gain influence with suppliers and consumers alike. Since 2006, Russia and Russian companies have invested over US\$30 billion in the Iranian oil and gas sector, and continue to coordinate projects in Iran worth tens of billions more. This cooperation not only provides Russian influence to stabilize oil process, but provides leverage against threats to Russian oil and gas exports by pipelines from Central Asia directly to Europe.<sup>83</sup> Proving that their relationship is purely transactional, Russia systematically absorbed “Iran’s global oil market share when the country was under sanctions.”<sup>84</sup>

### **General Implications**

Russia has more influence over Iran than any other foreign entity, but Iran also uses Russia in pursuit of its own objectives. That Russia is able to balance relationships with Iran, Israel, Syria and Saudi Arabia, as well as most other actors in the region is a testament to its lack of permanent alliances and preconditions. Even though Russian partnerships in the Middle East are transactional rather than permanent, many are long-standing, providing the potential for long-term Russian presence in the region well past 2028, which is Putin’s (Russia’s) goal. Russia’s lack of preconditions for its partners provides some advantage over the US, however U.S. willingness to engage in permanent alliances and semi-permanent coalitions is a point of leverage for the US. The United States has dealt with a proliferation of Soviet/Russia arms around the world since the advent of the Cold War. However, Russian proliferation of advanced missile systems and nuclear technology and assistance to Iran is a major issue between the United States and Russia that adds to the adversarial nature of the relationship.

Russian weapons proliferation and tactics collaboration with Iran presents tactical and operational challenges for the United States in the Middle East. The Iranian military, and to a more limited extent its proxies, will be equipped with advanced Russian missiles and/or Russian-Iranian hybrid systems in any conflict with the United States and/or its allies. U.S. defeat systems will have to be developed and employed accordingly. Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria presents a double challenge, which is made more complex by their cooperation with NATO member Turkey. Russian-Iranian collaboration in tactics means increased interoperability and the potential for integrated operations. Russian adaptation of Iranian non-conventional tactics provides more options for its “Little Green Men” and state-sponsored proxies.



## Israel 2028 Operational Environment Overview

### Political

#### ***Balancing Requirements***

Israel continues to have political challenges both domestically and internationally well into 2028. Internally, the country is struggling with the increased polarization between secular and religious factions of the population. To complicate matters, the country's international influence is shrinking, especially as Europe grows less Israel-friendly. Israel is experiencing demographic changes within its borders as immigrants flow into Israel seeking to benefit from its political stability. The United States remains Israel's strongest and most reliable ally, notwithstanding changing American administrations. Strategic engagement to enable economic security and expansion continues to shape Israel's international relationships, finding new partners and

cultivating relationships cautiously, despite the occasional American disapproval. Furthermore, Israel continues to balance relationships with partners that maintain relationships with other countries that are hostile to Israel (e.g., The United States' ties with Saudi Arabia and Russia and China's connections to Iran). Seemingly antithetical, these relationships are necessary to balance Israeli interests.<sup>ix</sup> Palestinian statehood dialogue remains unchanged, continuing to ebb and flow as international attention waxes and wanes, but without resolution.

#### Military

##### ***Leveraging technology for growth***

In 2028, Israeli military investment and development continues to be a defense priority. Israel's military has limited manpower growth opportunities and is also careful about increasing in size, as neighboring Arab states closely monitor its posture and interpret Israeli Defense Forces expansion as aggression. Instead, Israel continues to increase capability through technological advances, particularly in the cyber and space domains. Israel continues to export military technology to other countries, including reconnaissance drones, and partnering in advancements with the United States.<sup>x</sup> Israel gains momentum in niche tech sector advances, making Israeli components essential parts of military technology that are not the final product, increasing their exportable value. Israel's adversaries have not invested as heavily in military technology, but a lack of technological advancement is not an inhibitor to the development of low-budget attack capabilities. Israel's military must be able to counter unpredictable adversaries like Iran, who despite continued military investment in foreign capabilities, are continually plagued by political volatility that could flare into a broader regional conflict.

#### Economic

##### ***Necessary growth drives foreign policy***

By 2028, Israel sees a high return on national investments and priorities, but is also managing increased domestic requirements. In order to meet these requirements, Israel is expanding its diplomatic and economic ties with the world's fastest growing economies to access export markets and new sources of investments.<sup>xi</sup> In 2028, Israel's economic growth and stability may drive foreign policy, prioritizing positive international relationships for trade.<sup>xii</sup> Israel continues to prioritize its human capital and technology development, both seen as an export opportunities, but also as a necessary defense strategy. The shekel remains strong and correlated to the U.S. dollar, but trade partnerships with both China and Russia increasingly connect the influence of the yuan and the ruble to the shekel. The multi-decade negotiations with Russia to extend a natural gas pipeline from Turkey<sup>xiii</sup> into Israel make the country's energy sector more reliant on Russia. Israel's burgeoning tech industry attracts both Chinese and European partners, as it has kept pace and frequently exceeded other countries' development capabilities. Though Israel's aging population increases the potential for economic strain, its government's ability to make sound economic investments tempers the cost of demographic obligations. However, Israel's finite availability of land has created a point of contention as its agricultural sector struggles to balance addressing the demands of an increasing population with enabling economic opportunities.

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<sup>ix</sup> (Krasna 2018, 5)

<sup>x</sup> (Freedman 2017)

<sup>xi</sup> (Efron, et al. 2019)

<sup>xii</sup> (Gvosdev and Marsh 2014, 305)

<sup>xiii</sup> (Freedman 2017)



## Social

### ***Growth with implications***

By 2028, the Israeli population grows up to 1.4%, possibly reaching 11.4 million people, of which 73% are Jewish – a slight decline from 2010 (75% Jewish).<sup>xiv</sup> Israeli life expectancy is lengthening, resulting in a slightly older population. Arab population growth has not been as explosive as once predicted, as relative affluence and women's education have declined birth rates (slowing from 2.7% to 1.8%), albeit growth is still at a greater rate than Jewish Israelis. Jewish immigrant populations are unique in Israel by their willingness to adapt and assimilate to Israeli culture. Although these immigrants learn and embrace Hebrew as a second language, they are still culturally and socially tied to with their country of origin.

In 2020, one million people living in Israel speak Russian as a first language; a significant 12% of the total population is from Russia and other former Soviet countries.<sup>xv</sup> By 2028, this Russian-speaking demographic has increased at a higher rate than the rest of the population, bolstered by a higher birth rate and increased immigrant populations.

While it remains one of the poorest communities within Israel, the Orthodox community continues to be one of the fastest growing populations.<sup>xvi</sup> While a small segment of the overall Israeli population, the Orthodox have a disproportionately large political voice. Israeli emphasis on economic growth has lifted religious-based restrictions on public access to services, widening the schism between orthodox and secular communities socially and politically. Internal shifts in the orthodox population demographics see the population of Sephardic Jews of Middle Eastern heritage increasing faster than Ashkenazi Jewish of European decent, causing another internal cultural fault line.

## Information

### ***Globally connected and info savvy but circumspect***

In 2028, Israel maintains the distinction of being the most democratic country in the Middle East, and the free flow of information reflects that status. The open society, enabled by highly valuing technology and communication, demands information and communication flow. Israeli society is increasingly internationally connected, reflecting its historically immigrant population. In particular, the younger population is particularly tech savvy and has a significant presence on social media, creating a vulnerability for external influencers. Foreign investors have increased movement into the country and brought difference voices to Israeli media. Israel has been cognizant of potential information manipulation of elections and politics, implementing legislation for election oversight and marketing influences,<sup>xvii</sup> and leading international dialogue to curb infiltration attempts.

## Infrastructure

### ***Foreign investments facilitate growth***

In 2020, Israel was believed to have some of the world's most congested roads,<sup>xviii</sup> which, when paired with the scarcity of open land available for development, restricts the potential for economic opportunity. By 2028, Israel's investment in public transportation has increased its economic potential, and significantly improved both human and product movement via roads and light rail. Israel has accomplished this by diversifying its investment partnerships with countries

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<sup>xiv</sup> (Druckman 2013)

<sup>xv</sup> (Krasna 2018, 10)

<sup>xvii</sup> (Entous 2019)

<sup>xviii</sup> (Reuters 2019)

around the world (e.g., Germany, Italy, and Japan). China, in particular, has made significant investments targeted at improving the infrastructure of Israel's ports, tunnels, and railway lines.<sup>xix</sup> Despite the potential benefits that can be gained by diversifying foreign direct investment, Israel continues to operate under the wary eye of the United States.

Israel's infrastructure continues to be a flash point for social tensions. The political relationship between the government and the religious right is often frustrated by the sometimes contradictory demands of increasing economic output, while respecting and maintaining cultural traditions. This is perhaps best exemplified through the decision to lift the public transit ban during the Jewish Sabbath (Friday evening to Saturday evening), which was applauded by the business community but admonished by the orthodox community.

### **Russian exploitation of the Israel's Strategic Conditions**

#### ***Russia – The other, other global power***

Russia attempts to portray itself as an attractive partner to Israel through deliberate outreach, but Israel is not the disposable partner Russia is leveraging in other situations. Russian engagement with Israel enables Russia to invest in a stable Middle Eastern economy, and has the added benefit of also making the United States uncomfortable. Russia sees entree into Israel is not only a way to irritate the US, it also reduces Russian international isolation by warming up to a Western-allied country.<sup>xx</sup> However, Russia is unable to manipulate Israel to its singular advantage as it has other countries, because Israel has much to offer Russia and will serve its own welfare first. Russia must also balance emerging Chinese attention to Israel's tech sector and infrastructure growth opportunities.

#### ***Incentivizing expelled Russian ex pats***

As the self-identified protector of Russian ethnic culture, Russia will seek to leverage the large Russian-speaking community in Israel. As the Russian population grows, so does Russia's reach into Israel. Russia's outreach to expatriate World War II veterans living in Israel, providing them with financial enticements like pensions, will influence Russian communities in Israel to be sympathetic to Russian interests. Russia tries to exploit media communications targeted at the Russian-speaking communities in Israel, conveying state-approved messages designed to support its economic prioritizations. However, Russia may be overextending the hand of friendship, forgetting why the Russian Jews emigrated in the first place.

#### ***The enemy of my friend is also my...friend***

In order to remain a global power, Russia must maintain a number of relationships around the globe, particularly in the Middle East. Russia will use its relationship within the region to either influence or irritate Israel. Russian arms sales and nuclear assistance is more relevant in the Arab world, but Israel has international leverage as a Western country. Because Russia may be able to work through both Israel and the Arab world, Israel watches their relationships closely and is not easily manipulated. If Israel pulls back from Russian influence, Russia would have to evaluate the value of its regional connections. Likewise, Israel remains interested in building relationships that enable leverage over its adversaries, particularly Iran.

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<sup>xix</sup> (Efron, et al. 2019)

<sup>xx</sup> (Lasensky and Michlin-Shapir 2019, 154)

### **General Implications**

While Russian-Israeli relations have been tumultuous to the point of schizophrenic, both countries continue to pursue opportunities for their respective benefits. Russia carefully seeks advantageous leverage points, but is cognizant of acting too brashly because a misstep could lead to large and enduring consequences—especially as Russian and Israel become more economically tied together.

Israel prides itself on historical precedent, and though small in stature cannot be easily manipulated by others. Despite this national fortitude, Israel cannot keep tabs on and react to Russia's mercurial global partnerships, and may risk missing an opportunity to gain a contemporary advantage. As Israel's economy diversifies its international portfolio, the United States must be more mindful of other countries' interests, which may be advantageous to Israel but counter to American priorities. Though the United States is Israel's strongest partner and military ally, it cannot forget that Israel's economic strength represents a large component of its plans to maintain security. If the United States steps back from Israel economically, it may create a space that Russia could fill.



## The Republic of Georgia 2028 Operational Environment Overview

### Political

#### ***Western Aspirations, Domestic Challenges and Moscow's Ever Present Shadow***

Despite not being formally accepted into either NATO or the European Union, the Georgian government has continued to prioritize political and economic relations with western powers. Russia's overt support for the non-recognized, putative governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia continues to inhibit Georgia's western ambitions. Domestically Tbilisi maintains centralized control over much of Georgia's territory and works closely with the autonomous Republic of Adjara. The unresolved conflicts in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia continue to allow Russia to challenge Tbilisi's internal sovereignty. While a second Rose Revolution type event is unlikely to occur, Russia's continued interference compels Tbilisi to maintain a hyper-awareness concerning the domestic population's perception of foreign influence.

## Military

### ***Modernized David Facing a Russian Goliath***

Though not a member of NATO, Georgia maintains an Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO, which has led to increased interoperability and a continuous posture of readiness. The Georgian Defense Forces (GDF) are well armed and well trained, however its overall military strength pales in comparison to that of its most likely adversary, Russia. The enduring presence of Russian military forces in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia remains a primary concern, and challenge to Georgia's sovereignty.

## Economic

### ***Continued Economic Reform with Regional Aspirations***

Georgia has positioned itself as a regional economic hub and financial center connecting Asia and Europe. Georgia's rapid adoption of western reforms following the Rose Revolution has enabled it to become a financial hub, giving it an economic edge over other nations in the Caucasus region. Tbilisi's efforts to reintegrate the breakaway regions through economic incentives have thus far been unable to bridge the socio-economic divide caused by decades of simmering conflict.

## Social

### ***Cultural Crossroads Ensnared by Ethnic Strife and Regionalization***

By 2028, Georgia's ethnic and regional factionalization has increased significantly since the fall of the Soviet Union, creating a great deal of tension within the country. Unresolved frozen conflicts, grounded in ethnic and cultural divisions, have continued to catalyze and deepen resentment and reinforce existing perceptions of disparity.

## Information

### ***Progressive Approach with Vulnerabilities from External Sources***

Access to both high speed internet and cellular service is not a problem in most areas of Georgia, however Tbilisi has been ineffective in influencing the breakaway regions. Tbilisi is still unable to invest in the communication infrastructure in these areas, forcing the populations to be dependent upon Russian investment to maintain and update existing communications infrastructure. Georgia has been competing against Russian disinformation operations for decades, with domestic policy toward information freedom alternating between periods of western liberalization and regressive campaigns of censorship depending upon the political circumstances.

## Infrastructure

### ***Systematic but Selective Infrastructure Development***

By 2028, Georgia's infrastructure has seen significant modernization and improvement throughout the country. Of particular note is Georgia's effort and investment to restructure its domestic power grid almost entirely around hydroelectric and green power initiatives. Through heavy investment Georgia has become a regional leader in the transmission and distribution of electricity; however Georgia's dependence upon hydroelectric power makes it susceptible to seasonal fluctuations which could lead to sporadic energy dependence upon its neighbors. The exception to this trend of heavy investment, progress, and development are the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which remain outside of Tbilisi's sphere of direct control.



### *Abkhazia in 2028 (Subsection)*

#### Political

Political institutions are functioning and capable of providing essential services, but they are operationally dependent upon Moscow for financial and administrative support.

#### Military

By 2028, Abkhazia's military remains reliant upon Russia for administrative and material support. Its military equipment consists of outdated Russian/Soviet equipment, however its personnel have been almost entirely integrated into the Russian security forces. This integration has led to consistent and capable interoperability between local, national, and Russian forces.

#### Economic

Abkhazia's economy has traditionally benefited from its location on the Black Sea. In 2028, Russia continues to be Abkhazia's main trading partner, however, Abkhazia diversified its economic portfolio through increased trade with Turkey and other Black Sea states. Institutional corruption continues to limit the flow of foreign direct investment into the Abkhazian economy.

#### Social

Abkhazia has a significant ethnic Georgian minority, however the ethnic Abkhaz majority controls most facets of society. While tensions from previous conflicts still exist, the ethnic Georgians and Abkhazians are able to coexist in a segregated manner at a local level. A large percentage of the population in Abkhazia hold either Russian or Georgian passports.

#### Information

Russian is the *lingua franca* in Abkhazia. Russian media has a near monopoly over the formal and digital information environments, although many ethnic Georgians prefer to look to Tbilisi rather than Moscow.

#### Infrastructure

Abkhazia still depends upon Russian investment, however by 2028, its growing Black Sea based economy has enabled investment into infrastructure beyond what is invested by Russia.

### *South Ossetia in 2028 (Subsection)*

#### Political

By 2028, South Ossetia has almost completely isolated itself from Georgia, becoming a sort of client state to Russia. A lack of local civil expertise has led Moscow to fill the majority of municipal positions with Russian nationals. As a result of this, nearly every formal institution within South Ossetia is closely connected to and dependent upon Moscow for support, and as such, are plagued by corruption and mismanagement.

#### Military

By 2028, the South Ossetian security forces, including police, military, and some paramilitary, have been incorporated into the Russian Armed Forces. Private Military Contractors that are funded by Russia continue to train the remaining unincorporated paramilitary and militia organizations in order to enhance their interoperability with Russian Forces.

#### Economic

South Ossetia's lack of natural resources and underdeveloped infrastructure has led to an extreme dependence upon Russian economic aid. Russian and Georgian talks of a developing an economic corridor through South Ossetia have long since ended due to disagreements concerning sovereignty.

#### Social

By 2028, there is no longer a presence of ethnic Georgians within South Ossetia. Ethnic Ossetians who fled to Russia during previous conflicts have returned from North Ossetia with increased ties to North Ossetia and Russia. Local interactions between ethnic Ossetians and Georgians across the disputed border have become extremely rare, leading to an increase in perceived hostility and tension.

#### Information

Russian is the *lingua franca* in South Ossetia, though the Iron dialect of the Ossetic language is still in common use. Russian media has a near monopoly over the formal and digital information environments, which leads to an even further divide between Ossetians and Georgia.

#### Infrastructure

By 2028, virtually all of South Ossetia's infrastructure depends on Russian investments, and as such has been designed to facilitate military rather than civil purposes. Neglect of the civilian infrastructure has led to significant degradation in comparison to regions within Tbilisi's sphere of influence.

## **Russian Exploitation of the Republic of Georgia**

### ***Russianization of breakaway Populations***

Russia has exploited Georgia's inability to gain access into South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and enabled those populations to turn toward Russia for support. This has led to an immense amount of Russian influence and leverage within these two populations.<sup>85</sup> Russia has used this influence to exert a high level of control over governance, information, investment, and security within the two regions.<sup>86</sup> Russia wants Abkhazian and South Ossetian cultures and societies to be reflective and accepting of Russian culture and society, through a process known as *Russianization*.<sup>87</sup> By exploiting the cultural divide between Georgia and its breakaway states, Russia is aligning the populations with Russian ideals and a Russian identity and is able to decrease the likelihood that the regions would be able to successfully reintegrate into Georgia. In the event that either or both

regions were successfully reintegrated into Georgia, Russia's stature within those populations would allow it to gain influence within the Georgian government.

### ***“Passportization” of Vulnerable Populations undercutting Repatriation of Territory***

The citizenship of the populations within Abkhazia and South Ossetia will remain in an indeterminate state. While a few ethnic Georgians maintain their Georgian citizenship, in the initial decade of the 2000's, many people found themselves unable to travel due to the unrecognized status of each state. Recognizing this, Russia created a policy of “passportization” that enabled a large percentage of the South Ossetian and Abkhazian populations to adopt Russian citizenship.<sup>88</sup> By granting these populations passports and citizenship, Russia was able to pull them under its umbrella of protection and buoy their ability to deter potential Georgian efforts to reclaim the territories by force, essentially making any attack by Tbilisi an act of aggression against Moscow. Though both Abkhazia and South Ossetia have begun issuing their own passports, they still maintain a large population of Russian citizens.<sup>89</sup> By creating dispersed populations of Russian citizens throughout Eastern Europe, Moscow is able to gain influence in these areas if needed. Even if Georgia was able to reclaim South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia believes it can maintain a high level of influence and pro-Russian perspectives, potentially giving Russia a legitimate avenue of influence within Tbilisi.

### ***Military Posture in de facto States***

Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia must contend with the asymmetric nature of their existential struggle against Georgia. Russia, having recognized that neither state has an indigenous capacity to compete with the Georgian security forces, has sought to exploit this imbalance. Russia has flipped the asymmetry through financial and military support in order to deter any potential Georgian efforts to repatriate the territories through force. Russia maintains thousands of deployed troops in each territory, and has officially integrated existing Abkhaz and South Ossetian formations into the Russian military. This military support enables Russia to maintain a significant footprint south of the Caucasus Mountains, establishing a forward posture under the guise of ensuring the safety of Russian citizens living abroad. This also allows Russia to maintain control over the two primary avenues of approach across or around the Greater Caucasus Mountains and into Georgia.

### ***Disrupting Political Stability and Narrative in Tbilisi***

The government in Tbilisi finds itself having to balance a desire to look westward with a need to look inward, while evading the historical and ever-present allure of turning eastward. This creates politically vulnerable circumstances for Tbilisi, in which every domestic and international move it makes is subject to both domestic and international scrutiny. Using similar tactics as it used in Crimea, Russia is looking to exploit this vulnerability and disrupt Tbilisi's political stability and legitimacy. Russia seeks to create political overreactions and overcorrections through the spread of disinformation and maintaining enough international pressure to stymie talks of admitting Georgia into the European Union or NATO.<sup>90</sup> Russia's ultimate end state is the establishment of a more pro-Russian government in Tbilisi, and it uses the existing fragility within Tbilisi to simultaneously gain influence within the Georgian government and undermine its domestic legitimacy.

## **General Implications**

Georgia presents a case where Russia's desired end-state is the reincorporation of Georgia into Moscow's sphere of influence. Understanding that the reconstruction of the Soviet Union is unfeasible, Russia seeks to reestablish pockets of Russian influence in former Soviet states without falling victim to the overextension that undermined the Soviet Union. This push to reclaim former Soviet territory placed Georgia, and its access to the Black Sea, under immense pressure. Georgia's constant struggle to balance its desire to integrate its economy and create security partnerships with western nations, with its desire to regain control over its sovereign territory, creates an opportune situation for Russian interference. As Russia builds regional influence around the Black Sea, Georgia could find itself becoming increasingly geographically isolated. By exerting soft power, through economic, social, and political pressure on Tbilisi, Russia is setting the conditions to promote a more pro-Russia form of government as a stabilizing alternative to the current instability in Tbilisi. Arguably, the best case scenario for the Russians is to incorporate a pro-Moscow Republic of Georgia into the Russian Federation in a similar manner as it has done with the Northern Caucasus republics.

Russia has already used its patronage to establish itself as the preferred government in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia's military presence and financial aid in both regions have set the conditions for dependence, which enables it to direct development and potentially facilitate the mobilization and transportation of Russian military forces directly into Georgia. If Russia were able to exploit existing ethnic tensions, stoking them to the point of violence, it could use the instability it has fostered in order to justify the deployment of additional military forces to the region under the guise of protecting Russian citizens and entities.



## Venezuela

### 2028 Operational Environment Overview

#### Political

##### ***Cuban Communist Power Exercises Real Power through Bolivarianism***

In 2028, Bolivarians remain in nominal power in Venezuela, answering to the CCP, which is the real governing force for all Venezuelan domestic and international affairs. Governance is poor, but this has no effect upon the country's power structure as Bolivarians are entrenched throughout all government sectors. The CCP uses Venezuelan territory as a foothold to expand activities in other Latin American countries under the guise of social justice and coordinated through the Forum of Sao Paulo and capitalizing on the ubiquity of information technology. This includes support of political dissidents, rioters, transnational criminal organizations, and insurgents throughout the region.

#### Military

##### ***Bolivarian Military Uses Venezuela as Sanctuary to Project Regional Power***

In 2028, the armed forces in Venezuela are a regional, Bolivarian force and have a subordinated national loyalty. Senior level guidance stems from Havana, not Caracas, and Cuba supports



training of personnel. Bolivarians project power into neighboring countries, especially Colombia, through criminal gangs and guerillas, with the preponderance of power nested in the ELN and FARC. The offensive military strategy includes advancing Bolivarianism, securing resources through smuggling, and disrupting any potential U.S. action in the region by destabilizing neighboring countries. The defensive strategy involves using the Venezuelan armed forces to ensure Venezuelan territory remains a safe haven for irregular forces. Although the armed forces are incapable of repelling an invasion from the United States, Colombia, and/or Brazil, they have organized themselves to be capable of delaying any forward advance and making any incursion costly.

#### Economic

##### ***Hydrocarbons Fuel the Economy with Government Supported by Illicit Commerce***

In 2028, Venezuela is still a black hole for reliable statistical economic data, by design. General prosperity remains tied to the petroleum market. GDP and hyperinflation persist. The overt economy remains tied to the global hydrocarbon market. Low oil prices burden the economy regardless of government policy. Corruption and socialist policies slow but do not completely hinder economic growth when oil prices rise. Although the overall economy has deteriorated, the government remains well-funded, supported by illicit revenue from narcotics smuggling overland to Brazil and through the Caribbean to Central America, North America, and Europe. The government is also funded by other transnational criminal enterprises such as human smuggling and illicit mining. However, the actual financial strength of the government has been concealed through the use of cryptocurrency, nominally emplaced to support the economy but really functioning to conceal criminal transactions and bypass international sanctions.

#### Social

##### ***Diaspora Exacerbates Economic Hardship throughout the Region***

Venezuela's dramatic emigration has continued to worsen, fueled by general economic malaise and political repression. This has resulted in a brain drain that exacerbates domestic economic hardship and further entrenches Bolivarians in key positions of influence. Additional humanitarian crises will have taken place, not just in Venezuela but throughout the region. Neighboring countries such as Trinidad and Tobago, Colombia, and Brazil have been burdened by the influx of refugees, with security, infrastructure, social welfare, and health care systems pressed beyond capacity by the increased numbers and the spread of disease.

#### Infrastructure

##### ***Continued Erosion of Transportation and Energy Infrastructure***

By 2028, Venezuela's road, sanitation, and electric networks have experienced decades of significant neglect. Although life goes on in major urban areas, rural and economically depressed areas suffer major disruptions in service despite Venezuela's historically rich hydroelectric potential. With support from international partners, Venezuela has maintained its hydrocarbon infrastructure, but exploitation of this resource is reserved for export and does not percolate to the Venezuelan populace.

#### Information

##### ***Slow Recovery, if Any, from Chavista Legacy***

The Bolivarians have achieved complete media dominance throughout Venezuela. Advances in technology have enabled greater control of information flow. While the information grid itself is

functional in coastal urban areas, it remains marginal in the hinterland because of decaying infrastructure and unreliable electricity.

#### Physical Environment

##### ***Continued Degradation of the Environment Foments Disease***

Mismanagement and neglect of critical infrastructure had resulted in significant damage to the Venezuelan environment in the 2010s, and in 2028 the environment has worsened drastically. In particular, lack of treatment of waste and water foment the spread of hygiene-related disease epidemics that burden the already overstrained health care system and contribute to the emergence of new diseases and reemergence of previously-eradicated diseases. Additionally, deforestation and pollution continue and have a deleterious effect upon rural and indigenous economies.

#### **Russian Exploitation of Venezuela's Strategic Conditions**

##### ***Leveraging its Common Enemy to Strategically Counter the US***

Russia is interested in keeping the United States occupied in parts of the world other than Russia; one of the ways it is doing this is by developing strategic partnerships with potential U.S. foes. Russian military assistance to Venezuela proceeded to the backing rendered in Syria. As of 2019, Russia had already sent military advisors and provided Venezuela with aircraft and surface-to-air missile systems akin to those provided to Syria. Russia has also been selling military fighters. By 2028, the relationship has grown and further enabled the CCP, through Venezuela, to project military power. While total aid represents a fraction of Russia's assets, it demonstrates political commitment that advances Russia as a military partner of choice in the Western Hemisphere while enabling U.S. adversaries.

##### ***Using Economic Investment to Influence Global Energy-Producing Regions***

Russia has been involved with Cuba and Venezuela for decades and used its placement and access to fill market vacuums created by U.S. sanctions and restrictions on aid. This has included billions of dollars in trade and loans as well as exchange of expertise in the energy sector. By retaining as much influence as practicable over the Venezuelan hydrocarbon market, the Russian government can prevent the United States from achieving the strategic advantage that would result from increased U.S. control of Venezuelan production. As an energy exporter itself, influencing Venezuelan oil exports also enables Russia greater ability to manipulate global energy prices in its favor.

#### **General Implications**

Venezuela's lack of national foreign policy means Russia's partnership with Venezuela is tied to Russia's relationship with Cuba. By engaging in areas like Latin America, Russia undermines the US-dominated unipolar system of the 1990s and 2000s with a more multi-polar international system, eroding the liberal world order. Russia has had positional advantage in Latin America, including Venezuela, through Cuba for decades. Russia's continued presence and growing influence serves as a spoiler to the United States, under-cutting U.S. interests, and using peripheral issues like Venezuela to sustain U.S.-Russian dialogue and Russia's role as an arbiter

of international security. Increased influence in Venezuela allows Russia to reassert its status as a great power on the international stage with the ability to influence issues around the globe.

## Appendix D – Methodology

*Insert the infographic*

### Research Problem

During competition, the U.S. Army must understand how adversaries (e.g., Russia) leverage the OE to gain an advantage on the United States.

### Research Question

In 2028, how will Russia leverage the strategic environment to gain competitive advantage?

- (a) What conditions will likely shape the strategic environment in 2028?
- (b) Of the conditions identified, which are conducive to exploitation by Russia?
- (c) Based on Russian strategy, how and where might it exploit the identified conditions in 2028?
- (d) What are the implications of the predicted Russian exploitation for the U.S. Army?

### Research Process

To answer these questions, the study was conducted in four phases:

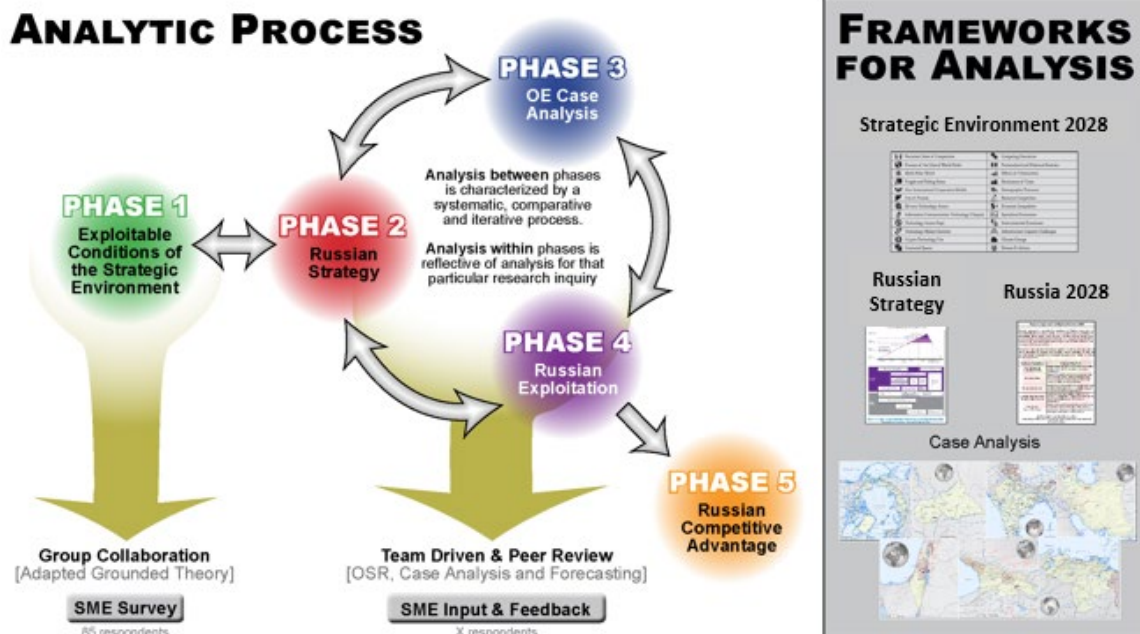
Phase 1: Identify and describe the most exploitable strategic conditions of 2028

Phase 2: Outline how Russia operates as it relates to its strategic interests

Phase 3: Conduct OE Case Analyses and determine how Russia leverages exploitable conditions

Phase 4: Forecast how Russia may gain a competitive advantage against the US

Each of the phases involved systematic research and analysis procedures. Analysis was strengthened by leveraging expertise from the U.S. Intelligence Community, the Department of Defense and Department of State communities, Academic institutions, and think tanks that specialize in research relevant to this study. Case analysis was used to scrutinize Russian strategy in light of the 2028 strategic environment and in accordance with specific OEs. OE cases were selected based on priorities of U.S. combatant commands and Russian interests as stated in official documents. This approach was designed to understand how Russia may influence and ultimately gain a strategic advantage against its major competitors—most importantly the United States.



Source: TRADOC G2

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