

## ETCHED IN STONE: RUSSIAN STRATEGIC CULTURE AND THE FUTURE OF TRANSATLANTIC SECURITY

Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky | July 2020

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russian strategic culture is a product of several key factors:

- a long history of wars and adversarial relations with other European powers;
- an open geographic landscape that puts a premium on strategic depth; and
- an elite given to embracing a narrative of implacable Western hostility to Russia.

Historically, Europe has been by far the most important geographic theater for Russia, and it remains so to the present day. The national narrative of Putin's Russia emphasizes the legacy of World War II in Europe and the critical role Russia played in the defeat of Germany. Both support the Kremlin's claim to special rights in the affairs of the continent.

Russia's threat perceptions, rooted in its strategic culture, reflect a remarkable degree of continuity between the Soviet past and the present day. The expansion of NATO since the Cold War has rekindled many of the same concerns the Soviet Union's leaders associated with the deployment of U.S. intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe in the 1980s. Taken together, the proximity of the NATO-Russia line of contact, the possibility of U.S. deployment in Europe of new land-based intermediate-range weapons, and the technological advances that have made such systems more lethal, even if conventionally armed, promise to put at risk all of European Russia.

Despite widely held views to the contrary, the strategic environment in Europe following Russia's aggression against Ukraine has resulted in a significant deterioration of its own position. NATO has effectively abandoned earlier hopes for a partnership with Russia and unambiguously adopted a new posture designed to deter and defend against Russian aggression. In the absence of the CFE and INF treaties, the alliance has greater flexibility to operate on Russia's periphery. In the aftermath of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, all countries on the European periphery have an adversarial relationship with Moscow, or at the very least consider it a threat. By violating the fundamental norms of the European security order, Moscow has planted the seeds of instability, unpredictability, and a lasting sense of insecurity on both sides.

The sharp deterioration of the European security environment has occurred at a time when technological breakthroughs that will put new weapons at the disposal of both Russia and the United States, and possibly other NATO allies, that will render most, if not all, defensive systems useless. This revolutionary transformation in conventional armaments, such as hypersonic cruise and conventional missiles, cyber weapons, AI-enabled weapons and autonomous systems, and



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space-based weapons, promises to be even more consequential than the demise of Cold War-era arms control agreements. Russian defense thinkers are beginning to think through the implications of such a sweeping transformation even as they cling to more traditional concepts that have served the Kremlin well in less complicated circumstances. Still, new weapons systems will render existing approaches to arms control, based on quantitative limits and intrusive verification regimes, obsolete. Arms control will have to be entirely reconceptualized based on new, as yet unformed, ideas about strategic stability, if it is to remain at all relevant.

Taken together, the demise of the European security architecture and the existing arms control and strategic stability framework increase prospects for continuing and growing instability in the European theater. Russia is highly unlikely to settle for the status quo, let alone future situations in which the threat to its heartland will increase. It can be counted upon to continue its campaign of destabilization and intimidation against its immediate neighbors and to undermine the cohesion and resolve of the NATO alliance as a whole as it seeks to forestall the arrival of a strategic landscape that could fundamentally disadvantage Russian security over the long haul.

At the same time, Russia's record even since 2014 makes clear that, while its policy is deeply rooted in Russian strategic culture and experiences with expansionism and insecurity, Russian leaders are not irrational. They invaded Ukraine—a war of necessity for the Kremlin, which feared the loss of the critical buffer—once it became clear that NATO would not intervene to defend it. Likewise, they intervened in Syria once it became clear that the United States would not intervene to topple the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Earlier, in one of the most tense moments of the Cold War, Soviet leaders negotiated the INF Treaty, when the United States and its NATO allies held firm and deployed Pershing II and GLCMs despite the massive Soviet-inspired campaign against the deployment.

Counting on changes in the Kremlin's thinking on national security matters—or the key concepts engrained in Russian strategic culture over the past several centuries—is an unlikely proposition. Moscow will remain a formidable adversary for the United States for many years and future administrations will need to take forceful action whenever Russian behavior threatens important U.S. national interests. The United States and its NATO allies and Russia, however, have a shared interest in avoiding worst-case scenarios. It will take years and patience, political will, leadership, vision, and diplomatic heavy lifting to build a more stable and enduring security environment and a political relationship between the United States and Russia that would permit new arrangements to manage that competition through arms control treaties or informal arrangements. In dealing with this problem it is useful to remember that, to paraphrase H.L. Mencken, “for every problem there is one solution which is simple, neat and wrong.”

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## INTRODUCTION

The field of national security studies offers multiple definitions of strategic culture and has yet to agree on one that would be universally accepted by scholars and policy practitioners. Most, if not all definitions, however, agree that strategic culture is a product of a country's geography, history, and shared narratives that shape the prevailing worldview of its national security establishment that in turn guides its responses to challenges and threats.<sup>1</sup>

The 2014 Russian aggression against Ukraine was a major turning point in the relationship between Russia and the West, including not only the countries that belong to the two principal political and security institutions of Europe—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU)—but also those that occupy the geographic and political space on their shared periphery with Russia. The annexation of Crimea and the undeclared war in eastern Ukraine were a shock to the politics and security of Europe as a whole. However, in retrospect, when examined in the context of Russian strategic culture, they should not have come as a surprise. The concept of strategic culture and its building blocks offer valuable insights into the drivers of Russian actions vis-a-vis Ukraine and trans-Atlantic security in general, as well as indicators of future likely Russian responses to developments on the continent.

This paper will offer an overview of the key building blocks of Russian strategic culture as it relates to Russian views on trans-Atlantic security, examine the developments in European security since 2014 in this context, assess their implications for Russian and U.S. security and interests, and conclude with policy implications and recommendations.

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## THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF RUSSIAN STRATEGIC CULTURE

When exploring the building blocks of Russian strategic culture, it makes sense to begin with its structural components. In other words, those factors are the least likely to change as a result of shifts in a country's domestic politics, prevailing ideology, and personal preferences of its leaders. Geography is therefore at the top of this list.

### The Fusion of Geography and History

To state the obvious, Russia is European.<sup>†</sup> Both Kiev, the original capital of the Russian state, and Moscow are in Europe. The country is predominantly Christian. Its culture, major aspects of its history, and critical trends in its development—economic, political, societal—are inextricably tied to Europe. Since the founding of the modern Russian state in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, its interests, key relationships with other powers, and foreign and security policies have been focused on Europe. Even Russia's pursuits outside the European theater—in the Caucasus, in Central Asia, and even in more distant geographic locales—had, at times, a key European dimension. The conquest of Central Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was an important element of Russia's competition with the British Empire. The Crimean War of 1853-1856 was waged against Russia by a coalition that included the Ottoman and British Empires and France.

In other words, the history of Russia's foreign policy as a modern state is mostly confined to the European theater. Since the establishment of the Russian Empire under Peter the Great in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, Russian military and diplomatic history is dominated by a succession of wars and diplomatic maneuvering with France, Austria, Great Britain, Sweden, Poland, Prussia, various other German states and principalities, and multiple combinations of these powers. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially during the Cold War, the principal arena of East-West confrontation was in Europe. Since the end of the Cold War, the focus of Russian diplomacy has been on rebuilding its position in Europe. Europe has always been and remains the geopolitical center of gravity of Russian foreign and security policy.

Even a cursory look at the map of Russia makes something else clear: it lacks natural physical features that could serve as a defensive barrier to shield the country from outside invaders or act as a powerful check on its own expansionist impulses. Throughout the history of the modern Russian state—since the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century—it has been pursuing territorial expansion to the west in Europe, to the east in Siberia, and to the south and southeast in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

In most geographic theaters, Russia rarely confronted a more powerful adversary to impede or stop outright its expansionist pursuits, or its efforts to ensure the safety and security of its lands and people; this was not the case, however, in Europe. The two nearly fatal invasions of Russia—by Napoleon's France and Hitler's Germany—are only the best-known and most dramatic examples of wars that Russia has fought in the European theater. But it is easy to overlook such dramatic episodes as the occupation of Moscow by the troops of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in

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<sup>†</sup> This is also one of the key arguments in our companion study "Russia in the Asia-Pacific: Less Than Meets the Eye."

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1610 and the territorial losses and concessions in multiple, mostly forgotten wars of the 17<sup>th</sup> century with Poland and Sweden.

At the risk of oversimplification, one can easily conclude that the entire history of Russian foreign policy—from the emergence of modern Russia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and especially since the establishment of the Russian Empire under Peter the Great in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, to the present day—has been a struggle for control of the geographic space between the western frontier of Russia and the eastern border of Germany.

It is also easy to overlook the fact that during periods of domestic instability, even turmoil, European powers capitalized on Russia's preoccupation with its own internal affairs to make significant territorial gains at its expense. That was the case in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century during the "time of troubles" following the death of Ivan the Terrible in 1584; in 1918, when Russia, as a result of revolution and civil war, signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and gave up most of what now comprises Finland, the Baltic states, Belarus, Ukraine, parts of Poland, and Moldova; and in 1991, when the Soviet Union dissolved and Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and the Baltic and the South Caucasus and Central Asian states gained independence.<sup>2</sup> Russia's experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has much greater relevance to Russian strategic culture than distant historical events. Russia's retreat in the European theater in 1918 and in 1991 paved the way for the establishment of several new independent states widely considered elsewhere in Europe as a sign of progress that would enhance the security and stability of the entire continent. That is not how these developments were perceived in Russia, where the loss of its vast European possessions was equated with strategic defeat and a major blow to the country's security and national psyche.

In the absence of natural barriers to separate Russia from Europe, and with a long legacy of conflict between it and the rest of the continent, strategic depth has become a critical element of Russian security, twice saving Russia from defeat in 1812 and in 1941. Regaining that strategic depth was the principal task of the young Soviet state as soon as the Bolsheviks gained the upper hand in the civil war; by 1922, Russia had regained most of the old empire and the margin of security that came with it. Similarly, regaining that margin of safety in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union became the principal task of Russian foreign policy in the 1990s, first with the establishment of the Russia-Belarus union in 1996. With discussions about NATO admitting new members well underway in the mid-1990s, it could not have been lost on Russian national security officials that both Napoleon and Hitler had marched across Belarus to the gates of Moscow.

### In Europe, but Not with Europe

Although in Europe and integral to the continent's security, political, and cultural fabric, Russia has had throughout its history a difficult and complicated relationship with the rest of the continent. In a 2016 article, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov complained that from the very origins of the Russian state, it was forced to "defend the right of the Russian people to have their own faith and decide their own destiny despite the European West's attempts to subjugate Russian lands and deprive them of their own identity."<sup>3</sup> That commitment to defend the Russian identity and way of life "is in our genes," he concluded.<sup>4</sup>

The gap between Russia and "the European West," to use Lavrov's terminology, covers both the hard and soft power aspects of their relationship. Aside from the historic differences between the

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Russian Orthodox and Catholic churches, and despite Russia's active participation in European power politics since Peter the Great cut through the "window to Europe," it has struggled to establish its legitimate place among the great European powers and gain their acceptance of its rightful place among them.

The gap between Russia and the European West became especially pronounced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Despite its critical role in defeating Napoleon, whose conquest of nearly all of continental Europe no other power was able to stop, Russia's acceptance by the major European powers—Austria, Prussia, France, Great Britain—as one of them proved elusive. As most of the rest of Europe was being consumed by revolutionary fervor and democratic movements, Russia remained firmly autocratic and committed to extinguishing popular uprisings within its own empire and rescuing wobbly monarchies elsewhere, especially when trouble broke out near its borders, as was the case in 1848 with the Austro-Hungarian Empire.<sup>5</sup>

The reverse side of Russia's emergence as the "gendarme of Europe" and defender of autocratic values was the fear of other major powers that it was growing too powerful.<sup>6</sup> The Crimean War launched in 1853 by the British-led coalition, which included Austria—whose monarchy Russia had rescued only a few years earlier—was intended to contain Russia's expansion at the expense of the faltering Ottoman Empire and to acquire more territories.<sup>7</sup> The rush by a coalition of European powers to defend the oppressive Ottoman regime from Russia's intervention, undertaken in the name of protecting fellow Christians suffering under the Turkish yoke, was interpreted by Russian nationalists/Slavophiles as proof of Europe's duplicity and inherent, incorrigible Russophobia.<sup>8</sup> Nikolay Danilevskiy, a leading 19<sup>th</sup> century Slavophile ideologist, complained about Europe's double standard—declaring war on Russia when it demanded that the Ottomans respect the rights of their Christian subjects, but condoning the 1864 "partition" of Denmark by Prussia and Austria, when they intervened in Schleswig and Holstein and forced Denmark to cede both, ultimately to a unified Germany.<sup>9</sup>

The intellectual and political line of Russia's quest for recognition and dissatisfaction with Europe's denial of its presumed inherent rights as a great power enjoyed by other European major powers can be traced from 19<sup>th</sup> century Slavophiles to 21<sup>st</sup> century Russian politicians, including Putin.<sup>10</sup> In their eyes, Russia's claim to Crimea, which they regard as integral to the Russian state, is no less legitimate than the support of the Western European powers and the United States for the establishment of Kosovo, a former province of Serbia, as an independent state. The adversarial relationship between Russia and Europe's West is part of a long and established Russian narrative.

## A Shared Worldview

The sense of grievance against "Europe's West" and, by association, the United States, is a prominent feature of the entrenched worldview broadly shared by Russia's national security establishment—apparently a product of its experience during and since the Cold War. Putin is a typical representative of this establishment, whose many members are currently presiding not only over Russian defense and foreign policy, but also domestic politics and the economy; in this context, it is not difficult to understand the Russian President's nostalgia for the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup>

Decision-making on national security and foreign policy issues by a narrow circle of like-minded elites is a long-standing feature of Russian political and strategic culture. In tsarist Russia, it was the

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domain of a small circle of court officials drawn largely from the military and diplomatic elites who were a product of the upper echelons of the bureaucracy and aristocracy.<sup>12</sup> In the Soviet Union, the policy was guided by the Communist Party leadership with inputs and support from the bureaucracy, including the military, diplomatic, intelligence, and academic communities.<sup>13</sup> The direction and tenor of Russian and Soviet foreign policy have always been determined at the top of the political-bureaucratic pyramid. That remains the case in post-Soviet Russia, where foreign policy remains the president's exclusive domain, which he manages with the help of a small circle of advisors, mostly with similar backgrounds to his own. Under Putin, the Security Council appears to be the Russian president's circle of close advisors where major foreign policy issues are considered and decided.<sup>14</sup>

For Putin and his generation of senior Russian national security decision-makers, mostly men in their 60s and career professionals who rose through the ranks of Soviet intelligence, armed forces, and domestic security, the fall of the Soviet Union was a dramatic event rather than cause for celebration.<sup>15</sup> These were children of the Soviet Union's "greatest generation" that had fought and won a historic victory in the Great Patriotic War, as World War II is commonly referred to in Russia; they grew up and advanced in their careers as their country was reaching the pinnacle of its power—conquering outer space, building a nuclear arsenal second to none, sailing the high seas, and firmly controlling a vast European empire. Within that system, they belonged to a privileged class, enjoying the trust of the Communist Party and material benefits available only to very few Soviet citizens.

The West was the adversary for many of these Soviet national security professionals. In their narrative, Western radio stations broadcast hostile propaganda aimed at undermining the Soviet Union's hold on its outer empire in Europe, as well as its domestic stability.<sup>16</sup> NATO was a hostile military alliance whose weapons threatened the Soviet heartland. The West applied economic pressure through trade embargoes and denial of advanced technologies to the Soviet Union in order to wring geopolitical concessions from it; these actions were often taken under the guise of promoting human rights and democracy, but in the view of the national security elites they were aimed at rolling back the Iron Curtain and denying the Soviet Union the gains of its victory in World War II, as well as the security for which the country paid such a heavy price.<sup>17</sup>

The collapse of that state, political system, and ideology was complete and sudden. For generations of Soviet security professionals who were brought up to believe in the political system and its ideology and to serve the state, the explanation of the Soviet collapse was to be found in the malign actions of the Soviet state's adversaries and their efforts to subvert it from within. For many of these former Soviet security apparatchiks, the Cold War, after a brief interlude in the 1990s, has continued as in their eyes the West, not content with the break-up of the Soviet Union, has waged a campaign against Russia. The aims of that campaign were two-fold: the first was to weaken Russia and encircle it with hostile neighbors by means of sponsoring "color revolutions" around its periphery and expanding NATO; the second was to further subvert Russia from within by supporting non-governmental organizations, promoting hostile, pseudo-liberal ideologies, and corroding the traditional values of Russian culture and society.<sup>18</sup> In this narrative, the ultimate goal of the West's policy toward Russia is to stage a "color coup."<sup>19</sup> In other words, the "velvet" revolutions of 1989, the break-up of the Soviet Union, the expansion of NATO, and the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine are part and parcel of the West's long-term campaign against the Soviet Union and Russia.

Along with the thesis of the West’s enduring hostility toward Russia, the Kremlin’s national narrative devotes special attention to the legacy of World War II, or the Great Patriotic War, as the cornerstone upon which rest Russian claims to recognition as a great power and special voice in the affairs of Europe. According to this narrative, Russia contributed more than any other nation to the defeat of Nazi Germany. During public discussions about changes to the Russian constitution in 2020, some Russian politicians even proposed a special amendment that would affirm the status of Russia as a “country-victor” in World War II.<sup>20</sup> The proposal earned a favorable comment from Putin, but eventually was shelved.<sup>21</sup>

In the Kremlin narrative, Russia, as a “country-victor” in World War II, which gave rise to the international system that exists today, a founding member of the United Nations, and a major nuclear power, bears special responsibility for the legacy of World War II.<sup>22</sup> This responsibility, according to the narrative, includes ensuring the correct historical record of the war and defending it against attempts to falsify it, upholding the post-World War II international system, and building a stable world order. Putin personally has taken the lead in this effort, engaging in polemics with foreign opponents and insisting on his firmly held interpretation of the history of World War II and its origins.<sup>23</sup> In an unprecedented move, he even published a lengthy article in a U.S. policy journal sparring with his opponents, which once again highlighted the special contribution of the Soviet Union to victory and the long-standing, historic animosity of the West toward USSR and Russia.<sup>24</sup> There is rarely any mention in Russian discussions about World War II of the war in the Pacific or the brief campaign the Soviet Army waged against Japan in Manchuria in August 1945. There is no doubt that in the Kremlin narrative Russia’s war began and ended in Europe. Europe is where Russia’s historical legacy is and where the Kremlin’s national narrative demands it focus its energies.

In sum, the critical building blocks of Russia’s strategic culture—its geography, historical experience, worldview of the national security establishment, and ideology and national narrative—point to Europe as the key geographic theater for its national security interests and policy, the principal arena of Russian ambitions, and the main source of Russia’s insecurity.

## RUSSIAN THREAT PERCEPTIONS: THE MORE THEY CHANGE...

The combination of enduring factors described above helps to explain the continuity of threat perceptions within the country’s national security establishment. The transition from the Soviet Union to Russia has had seemingly little effect on these perceptions.

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For the Soviet leadership, the victory in World War II and the conquest and consolidation of a vast empire that included all of Eastern Europe and half of Germany represented the pinnacle of power and influence on the continent without precedent in the history of the Russian state. Along with this unparalleled expansion of Russian power and influence, the empire’s vast expanse provided the

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Russian state with strategic depth and a degree of security from the adversaries in the West that was also unprecedented in Russian history. Securing these accomplishments that the country had paid so much for with blood and treasure became one of the chief preoccupations of the Soviet leadership after 1945. The suppression of unrest in Berlin in 1953, Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Poland in 1981 attests to the strength of that commitment.

It is easy for Western observers to dismiss the notion that NATO, as a defensive military alliance, posed a threat to the Soviet Union and its empire in Eastern Europe. But the idea of rolling back the Iron Curtain was more than a figment of the paranoid imagination of Soviet leaders, who saw Western leaders challenge the legitimacy of the Soviet empire and, in effect, the legitimacy of the outcome of World War II. U.S., British, and German radio stations broadcast what the Soviets considered subversive propaganda into Eastern Europe with the aim of loosening the Soviet Union's grip on it. U.S. presidents from Harry Truman in 1947 to Ronald Reagan in 1987 pledged support for "free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation..." and called on the Soviet leaders to abandon their empire.<sup>25</sup> Although this was to be done "primarily through economic and financial aid," the Soviet Union confronted in NATO a formidable military alliance, a superior economic and defense-industrial base, and a vast covert action toolkit that no Soviet national security leader could consider as merely "defensive."<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the military and covert action toolkit the Soviet Union deployed to counter that perceived array of threats, it undertook a major diplomatic effort to get the West to accept the outcome of World War II and the military-political order in Europe that resulted from it. The Helsinki Accords (known officially as The Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe), signed by 35 European nations and the United States in 1975, delivered to the Soviet leadership the formal recognition of post-World War II boundaries in Eastern Europe and the West's pledge not to change them by force.

The sense of security the Soviet leadership must have derived from that accomplishment proved short-lived as new threats materialized not long afterwards. The rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland in 1980 threatened the Soviet Union's hold on one of its satellites critical to its position in all of Eastern Europe. The deployment in Europe, beginning in 1983, of the highly accurate and mobile U.S. Pershing II Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBM), with a range of 1,100 miles, and Ground Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCM), with a range of 1,600 miles, posed a threat not only to Soviet forces in Eastern Europe, but to the Soviet heartland, including Moscow.

The security of the homeland resulting from the post-World War II settlement was thus greatly eroded with the United States' new capability to hold at risk the Soviet heartland with its intermediate-range arsenal, while remaining outside the range of intermediate-range Soviet missiles. The United States would thus be able to hold its strategic arsenal in reserve, while the Soviet Union would have to rely on its strategic arsenal to counter the U.S. threat, thus increasing the risk of an all-out nuclear exchange. Russia's sense of security further eroded in 1984, when the Reagan Administration created the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). The prospect—however distant—that the United States would acquire weapons that could erode the Soviet Union's retaliatory capabilities would further upset the balance between them—a vulnerability compounded by the threat from U.S. IRBM deployments in Europe.<sup>27</sup> In retrospect, these may seem like abstract and highly unrealistic arguments. But in the surreal context of the nuclear arms race at the time, they could not be overlooked.

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## And Now

Three decades later, Russia's national security establishment is facing many, even most, of the same threats that their predecessors faced in the 1980s. Except from the Russian perspective they are worse. Russia has lost strategic depth. An alliance it considers to be hostile has expanded to within a short distance of the Russian heartland and is considering deploying weapons system that Russia is powerless to defend against. On its immediate periphery, Russia is facing countries that are either its outright adversaries or at best highly uncertain and unreliable nominal partners. Not a single country in Europe can be counted upon as a partner, let alone an ally of Russia. To repeat Putin's words, quoting Tsar Alexander III's observation, the only friends Russia has are its army and its navy.<sup>28</sup> The strategic predicament the Kremlin found itself in was a result of its own blunders in Ukraine; prior to its invasion and annexation of Crimea, Russia faced a much more benign environment and NATO was not perceived as a serious military threat.

Over a period of two decades, the combined effects of the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the break-up of the Soviet Union, and NATO enlargement have placed the boundary between Russia and the rest of Europe—almost all of it either a NATO member or partner—approximately where it was after Russia agreed to the terms of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty in 1918. NATO troops are deployed in all three Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.<sup>29</sup>

Ukraine is now a Russian adversary after its illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the start of the war in eastern Ukraine. Belarus, nominally Russia's ally in the Russian-Belarusian Union State launched in 1996, has had a very complicated relationship with Russia, especially after the annexation of Crimea, and has been unwilling to draw closer to Russia under the guise of Russian-inspired integration. Since 2014, Belarus's President of nearly 25 years has been trying to improve ties with the West as a counter to Russian influence.<sup>30</sup>

Poland, which has a common border with the Russian province of Kaliningrad, has been a leading strident voice within the NATO alliance arguing for an increased U.S. forward presence to deter and defend against Russia.<sup>31</sup> It has been purchasing military equipment from the United States and is host to a U.S. Aegis Ashore missile defense site, which Russian defense officials have long complained is a threat to Russia.<sup>32</sup> The United States is poised to address Polish concerns by deploying an additional 1,000 troops to the country.<sup>33</sup> Some Polish and U.S. officials have even raised the possibility of deploying U.S. nuclear weapons from Germany to Poland—an unprecedented move that would result in a qualitatively different U.S. forward presence in Eastern Europe and U.S.-Polish defense relationship, providing a special security guarantee which some Polish leaders have evidently long sought.<sup>34</sup>

Few Russian military activities in the European theater have generated more discussion in the media and within policy circles than the deployment in the Baltic region of significant Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) capabilities.<sup>35</sup> The purpose of these deployments is to blunt any advantage NATO air forces might have over Russia, deny NATO allies access to the three formerly Soviet-occupied Baltic states in the event of a conflict or crisis in order to reinforce them, and establish an "air bubble" around the Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg regions.<sup>36</sup> However, even that investment in defensive capabilities (with obvious offensive applications in a potential NATO-Russia crisis or conflict) cannot mitigate the vulnerability of Russia's northwestern regions to NATO's countermeasures, stand-off weapons, electronic countermeasures, cyber-attacks against command and control systems, use of decoys, etc.<sup>37</sup>

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Within the context of Russian strategic culture, three decades after the end of the Cold War Russia is worse off than it was during the Cold War. For the country's national security establishment, the expansion of NATO, the transformation of its periphery into a belt of states that are either hostile or threatened by it, the EU and U.S. sanctions intended to choke off its economic development and technological progress, and the constant criticism of its domestic political arrangements amount to the return of its Cold War-era predicament, but only worse. The thirty years since the Cold War ended have seen Russia's gains as a result of World War II almost completely reversed.

## RUSSIA: REAPING WHAT IT HAS SOWN

Much, if not all, of the strategic environment in Europe is a product of Russia's strategic culture and diplomatic activity guided by it. Although often given credit for reasserting itself on the European and global stage, more often than not it has been skillful at exploiting others' mistakes or stepping into situations without powerful opponents. By any objective measure, based on the results of its activities over three decades, it would not be an exaggeration to say that since the end of the Cold War, Russia has played a weak hand rather poorly in Europe. Judging by its own metrics, is now facing a balance of power tilting against it in the most important strategic theater.

### The Demise of the European Security Architecture

One of the chief accomplishments, if it can be called that, of Russian post-Cold War diplomacy has been the destruction of the security architecture in Europe developed during the Cold War, especially its final stages. This includes the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

#### *CFE*

Signed in 1990, the CFE Treaty had to be adapted shortly thereafter to comply with the new post-Cold War conditions in Europe, including the break-up of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw pact. Negotiations about its adaptation became highly contentious and lengthy, and emerged in the course of the 1990s as one of the major new sources of disagreement between Russia and the West.<sup>38</sup> In 2007, Russia, frustrated by several European states' refusal to ratify the Treaty and their demand instead for changes in Russia's force posture, first "suspended" its participation in the treaty and then completely withdrew from it in 2015.<sup>39</sup>

The withdrawal prompted concerns in Europe—against the backdrop of the war in eastern Ukraine—about the deteriorating security environment and the threat of Russian military action against its other neighbors, especially those not covered by NATO's security guarantee. However, with the new geography of the NATO-Russia stand-off, the withdrawal from the CFE Treaty was fraught with potentially negative security consequences for Russia as well. It removed the limits not only on Russian deployments and movements of troops, which are now far more limited in scale because of the loss of the former Western republics of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact, but also on NATO deployments that are far closer to the Russian heartland than ever during the Cold War. Thus, the loss of the CFE Treaty further enhances the post-Cold War Russian vulnerability to threats from the west due to the loss of strategic depth.

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## INF

The most important blow to the European security architecture was Russia's deployment of the SSC-8/9M729 ground-launched cruise missile with a range of 2,500 km in violation of the INF Treaty.<sup>40</sup> In 2014, the United States raised its concerns with Russia about the missile, which Moscow claimed was not violating the INF Treaty.<sup>41</sup> The U.S. charge that Russia had violated the INF Treaty was backed by all NATO allies.<sup>42</sup> Having failed to resolve this disagreement with Russia, the United States withdrew from the INF Treaty in August 2019.<sup>43</sup>

The SSC-8 deployment and the subsequent demise of the INF Treaty, which senior Russian officials had long threatened to quit as a treaty signed by the Soviet Union in unfavorable circumstances, have been a blow to European security overall and a new threat to NATO countries.<sup>44</sup>

In 2019, the United States conducted tests of ground-based ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges previously banned by the INF Treaty.<sup>45</sup> If deployed—possibly, even if far from likely, in Poland—they would carry conventional warheads.<sup>46</sup> Over time, the combination of their range, mobility, and precision could hold at risk virtually any target in European Russia—beyond NATO's already extensive arsenal of air- and sea-based short- and intermediate-range missiles that were not prohibited by the INF Treaty.<sup>47</sup>

The potential introduction into this mix of hypersonic weapons would further underscore Russian vulnerability.<sup>48</sup> Some Russian experts view this possibility as a major threat to Russian security.<sup>49</sup> It is unlikely that NATO would approve the deployment of INF-class missiles on the territory of its members, especially nuclear-armed systems. But individual NATO members may have greater space to deploy conventionally armed systems on their soil with the assistance of the United States. Considering the deep-seated concerns about Russia in countries like Poland, such deployments could pose more of a threat to Russian interests and security than if undertaken under the collective umbrella of NATO.

## NATO's Assurances Do Die

As a result of the breakdown in the relationship since 2014, some important commitments NATO made to Russia at the outset of the enlargement process no longer apply.

In the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, the allies declared they would not need to undertake "permanent stationing of substantial combat forces" on the territory of new members "in the foreseeable security environment."<sup>50</sup> The deployment in the three formerly Soviet-occupied Baltic states of three battalion-sized battlegroups and a brigade-sized battlegroup in Poland may or may not be considered a violation of this pledge: it is a mix of rotational and permanent deployments.<sup>51</sup> But it is highly unlikely that, absent a fundamental change in the nature of the alliance or its relationship with Russia, the practice of continuous rotation of units will be discontinued. For all practical purposes, the 1997 pledge is therefore void.

Another likely victim of the 2014 breakdown in the relationship between NATO and Russia is the alliance's 1997 pledge not to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new NATO members. The NATO-Russia Founding Act contains a pledge that subsequently became known as the "three no's": "no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members, nor any need to change any aspect of NATO's nuclear posture or nuclear policy—and do not foresee any future need to do so."<sup>52</sup> The prospect of U.S. nuclear weapons being deployed in Poland, as

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previously mentioned, remains highly remote and subject to a whole host of strategic, military, and political considerations as a matter of both NATO policy and bilateral relations between Warsaw and Washington. However, the very fact that the issue has been raised, and that the conditions outlined in the 1997 document no longer apply, underscores that, at the very least, the credibility of the “three no’s” pledge has been severely eroded.

## A Wake-Up Call for NATO

The annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine have been the catalyst for NATO coming out of its post-Cold War phase when major war in Europe was unthinkable; instead, the alliance would focus its energies on improving capabilities for out-of-area contingencies and helping new members adapt to the new European security environment. NATO, one prominent Russian military analyst argued, was no longer a functioning military alliance—a view in effect echoed by some Western analysts as well.<sup>53</sup> The invasion of Ukraine changed that.

No doubt, the alliance still has a long way to go to meet its own targets on spending, readiness, new capabilities, etc., but for the first time in a generation it faces a real adversary in the European theater. While the possibility of a deliberate conflict between NATO and Russia is still distant, the requirement to defend vulnerable allies along the NATO-Russia line of contact has acquired new urgency. Official NATO publications reflect a wholly new, post-2014 attitude toward the priorities the allies face in “the most complex and unpredictable security environment since the end of the Cold War.”<sup>54</sup> Gone is the upbeat language of the alliance’s last Strategic Concept that declared “the Euro-Atlantic area is at peace and the threat of a conventional attack against NATO territory is low.”<sup>55</sup> Gone also is the language about “a true strategic partnership between NATO and Russia.” NATO’s top priority is “continuing to invest in defense and in the capabilities the Alliance needs.”<sup>56</sup> The alliance in 2020 bears little resemblance to the one that existed prior to 2014, even though there are profound (and oftentimes difficult to bridge) differences inside the alliance about how to deal with the Russian threat.

Russian saber-rattling in the Baltic region and invasion of Ukraine have further aggravated this situation. Ukraine, as was mentioned above, is a NATO partner that looks to the West for assistance against Russian aggression. In the Baltic region, in addition to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and Poland, which are members of NATO, Finland and Sweden have had extensive discussions about joining the alliance and are active NATO partners.<sup>57</sup> In May 2020, U.S. strategic bombers conducted an exercise with Swedish and Norwegian air forces in Swedish and Norwegian airspace.<sup>58</sup>

## BEYOND EUROPE

The fallout from developments in the European theater and technological innovation together have threatened another key element of the trans-Atlantic Cold War-era security architecture—U.S.-Russian strategic stability and arms control. These two critical elements of this structure are unraveling too.

The United States and Russia constructed and sustained a strategic arms control architecture during the Cold War and most of the post-Cold War era that made their nuclear competition more predictable and transparent and, thus, more stable. This edifice consisted primarily of formal, legally binding strategic arms control treaties—SALT, START, ABM, and INF<sup>59</sup>—with extensive verification measures. The exception to this rule was the set of mutual, reciprocal informal agreements embodied in the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) of the early 1990s. That framework is now almost gone. Its last remaining element—the New START Treaty—is set to expire in February 2021. Its provisions allow for a five-year extension by simple executive agreement, but a combination of long-standing opposition to arms control on the part of a significant segment of the national security establishment in the United States and the climate for arms control resulting from Russia violating the INF treaty make its extension very problematic.

Russia's violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty has poisoned the climate in the United States for negotiating new treaties until these violations are resolved to Washington's satisfaction.<sup>60</sup> It is highly unlikely that Russia will come back into compliance with the treaty or admit to violating it, and in the absence of the INF Treaty the possibility exists of the United States following in Russia's footsteps and deploying new INF-range systems in Europe. In the climate that is likely to persist in U.S.-Russian relations for at least the next few years, the U.S. Senate, regardless of who controls it, will not ratify a new U.S.-Russian arms control accord until there is a satisfactory resolution of the INF issue.

Although the fate of the INF and New START treaties have captured headlines<sup>61</sup>—some of them alarmist—the far more consequential story, which is attracting less attention, is the development of conventional weapons technologies that will have a far greater impact on the future of strategic stability and nuclear deterrence than the number of nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles each side possesses. The condition of mutual assured destruction, which has helped to deter a U.S.-Russian nuclear war for decades, will persist whether the two countries abide by New START limits or decide to engage in an expensive and ultimately fruitless race to build up their nuclear arsenals in the absence of the treaty.

The Cold War-era conceptual map underpinning U.S. and Russian views on strategic stability, nuclear deterrence, arms control, and the U.S.-Russian strategic balance, had several distinct features:

- first, it focused almost exclusively on each side's development and deployment of *nuclear* weapons, both strategic and non-strategic;
- second, with the notable exception of the PNIs, it featured the negotiation of formal, legally binding treaties with extensive verification;
- third, the U.S.-Russian approach to arms control concerned itself primarily with quantitative rather than qualitative limits;
- finally, and perhaps most importantly, the two sides defined strategic stability relatively narrowly as a condition in which neither the United States nor Russia has an incentive to use *nuclear* weapons first.

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Today this paradigm is too narrow for understanding the requirements of maintaining and strengthening nuclear deterrence and strategic stability in the face of evolving conventional weapons technologies. To remain relevant in the future, arms control will have to take account of new and emerging weapons technologies—conventional missiles, artificial intelligence, cyber weapons, missile defenses, and space-based weapons. Thus, thinking in a linear way about U.S.-Russian arms control efforts within the traditional START framework will confront several challenges:

- first, these technologies will be exceedingly difficult to regulate in legally binding arms control treaties. Many of them are dual-purpose, capable of both conventional and nuclear operations. The type of warheads these platforms will carry—whether they are nuclear or conventional—is physically indistinguishable. Constraints placed on some of these systems to maintain strategic stability could have an adverse effect on conventional capabilities;
- second, verifying limits on these novel technologies and systems would pose unique and perhaps insurmountable verification challenges, even with extremely intrusive measures, making legally binding treaties highly problematic;
- third, any attempt to capture these new technologies would present daunting definitional and technical challenges. The language of arms control treaties, which is inextricably linked to defining and monitoring compliance with treaty obligations, rests on such numerical concepts as units of account and weapons ceilings and sub-ceilings. Applying these concepts to cyber and artificial intelligence capabilities is far more challenging than counting launchers and warheads.

## A NEW STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

New U.S. and Russian conventional weapons could have a profound impact on strategic stability, crisis stability, and arms race stability because they are unconstrained by existing arms control treaties and are not subject to any rules or limitations. Absent mutual restraint, the integration of new technologies into the military doctrines and force postures of both countries is likely to have a profoundly destabilizing impact on arms race stability, crisis stability, and strategic stability.

### Threats to Strategic Stability

The integration of new conventional weapons technologies into U.S. and Russian arsenals and war-fighting plans, is bound to affect their threat perceptions. The following scenario could be highly destabilizing: a decapitating first strike against strategic command and control systems and early warning surveillance systems, followed by strikes on offensive systems to blunt a retaliatory strike. The addition of missile defenses to this mix would add to concerns about ensuring survivable second-strike capabilities and strategic stability.

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## Threats to Crisis Stability

Crisis stability—the ability to keep a crisis or confrontation from escalating into a nuclear war—will be threatened if and when the deployment of new weapons systems creates greater incentives to use nuclear or conventional weapons first in a crisis and, particularly, to attack quickly, before there is time to collect reliable information and carefully weigh all available options and their consequences.<sup>62</sup> Some of the new conventional weapons can be delivered from the same platforms as nuclear warheads, making it nearly impossible to determine whether it is carrying a nuclear or conventional warhead. This “warhead ambiguity” will be more prevalent and worrisome in the future as both countries field large numbers of hypersonic boost-glide ballistic and cruise missiles, which travel at tremendous speeds and fly trajectories that make defense against them exceedingly difficult. These emerging threats to crisis stability put a much greater premium on preventing and managing crises that could escalate to conventional or nuclear war and mitigating the risk that such a crisis could lead to an inadvertent conflict through misunderstanding or miscommunication.<sup>63</sup>

These technical and doctrinal innovations pose new threats to European security. They could compromise crisis stability in the conventional military balance in Europe. Both the United States and Russia will likely seek to deploy these capabilities to offset what they perceive to be their vulnerabilities in a conflict: the United States to compensate for its relative weakness in a short war limited to its eastern flank and Moscow to mitigate the risks it sees in a protracted conflict with NATO. Both countries will put a premium on cyber, artificial intelligence, and hypersonic weapons because of their potential to knock out the command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities of the other side and to disrupt the mobilization of forces—and thus to prevail in a conventional conflict.

The potential for losing a conventional war in Europe, from either side’s perspective, is dangerous because it increases the possibility that one or both sides might be tempted to believe that its use of limited tactical nuclear weapon (TNW) strikes could stave off conventional defeat, raising in turn the risk of strategic nuclear escalation. Hence Russia’s flirtation with the notion of “escalate to de-escalate,” which has been echoed in Russia’s recently released paper on nuclear deterrence.<sup>64</sup>

## Threats to Arms Race Stability

Arms race stability is typically defined as the absence of incentives to build up nuclear forces, either qualitatively or quantitatively.<sup>65</sup> Three developments could create these incentives: first, the demise of New START and the inability of Washington and Moscow to agree on a follow-on treaty will eliminate many of the treaty-based transparency and verification measures that made their bilateral strategic relationship more predictable; second, the end of Russian and American overflights of each other’s territory as part of the Open Skies Treaty will also reduce transparency of conventional forces; and third, the deployment of new conventional technologies as discussed above, if unaccompanied by mutual restraint measures.

The end of the INF Treaty is likely to stimulate a competition to deploy new INF-range systems in Europe and/or air and naval forces on and around the continent with deep-strike capabilities. Overlaying these two challenges on arms race stability is a third: arms racing that will be stimulated as each side introduces new weapons technologies into their force structure, many of which will be able to put second-strike capabilities at risk and defend national territory against retaliatory strikes.

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## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Looking ahead, it is tempting to hope that changes in Russian domestic politics, or its economic difficulties, will trigger shifts in its foreign policy similar to those of the Gorbachev era, and consequently East–West relations will improve dramatically. However, the framework of Russian strategic culture suggests that such a turn of events is highly unlikely. First, the Gorbachev period in Russian foreign policy was brief—a decade, arguably even less, after which the antagonistic relationship between Russia and the West gradually resumed. Second, strategic culture is a product of a nation’s domestic political traditions, history, and geography and, by definition, provides an enduring framework for its foreign and security policy. This is not to say that it is permanent and not subject to any change, but it is unlikely to change as a result of domestic political shifts, which in Russia’s case proved to be less dramatic than initially anticipated and assessed. Third, major shifts and retreats in Russia’s foreign and security policy have occurred during periods of domestic weakness, as happened in 1918 after the Bolshevik Revolution and in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In both instances, however, attempts to return to the status quo ante began as soon as the country regained even a fraction of its domestic stability and capabilities to project power beyond its borders.

As evident from the discussion of Russian strategic culture in the previous pages, Russian national security policy has long emphasized control over the country’s periphery and preventing other powers from establishing their foothold there. The invasion of Ukraine is but the latest example of Russian over-reaction to the threat, as Russian leaders see it, of foreign encroachment upon their desired buffer zone and sphere of influence. The experience of U.S. and European efforts in the aftermath of the Cold War to establish a mutually acceptable security regime with Russia for all of Europe demonstrates that the gap is unlikely to be bridged in the foreseeable future, if ever.

The development of new, highly destabilizing technologies, both conventional and nuclear, holds the promise of revolutionary changes in trans-Atlantic security. These changes will likely make obsolete most, if not all, existing approaches to strategic stability, arms control, and the very idea of treaty-based security arrangements between the United States and its European allies and Russia. To manage this new security environment, which will continue to suffer from deep-seated antagonisms and fundamentally different worldviews, a new approach to both conventional and nuclear arms control, strategic stability, and theater-wide European security is needed.

The technical approach to arms control, which has prevailed throughout the Cold War and the post-Cold War years, and which presumes that there is an elegant technical solution for challenges to mutual deterrence and stability, is far too antiseptic and apolitical—and is inadequate to ensuring strategic stability for a new era of unregulated competition in conventional weapons technologies. This model for arms control tends to focus on the hardware aspects of the competition and more often than not fails to take into account the less intangible drivers of that competition, such as a nation’s strategic culture and threat perceptions.

Russia’s quest for strategic depth as a measure of security against external threats may present limited opportunities for managing the arms race in the European theater. The INF Treaty was made possible at least in part by the deployment, beginning in 1983, of U.S. INF-range missiles that could hold at risk targets in the Russian heartland. The U.S. deployment was in response to the Soviet Union’s deployment of its SS-20 missiles targeting NATO. That episode may well be repeated with the deployment of Russian SSC-8 missiles in violation of the INF Treaty and the prospect of

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deployment of U.S. INF-range systems in Europe in response. The difference between the 1980s and the 2020s is that Russia no longer has the buffer of Eastern Europe and western republics of the USSR to absorb the threat from the west, the weapons systems have become more precise and lethal, and some may be conventional rather than nuclear-armed. While a new INF-like treaty is highly unlikely, an arrangement based on mutual restraint governing the number of weapons systems being deployed and their areas of deployment may be preferable to both Russia and the United States and its NATO allies.

In the absence of formal arms control agreements, both sides may find informal arrangements to help manage their strategic nuclear relationship helpful and possibly less difficult to negotiate:

- **An informal regime of interim strategic restraint:** The United States and Russia could agree to abide by the limits of New START even if the treaty lapses, just as the two countries did with SALT II. Under this approach, the verification provisions of New START would roll over into this arrangement while the two sides discuss supplemental protocols to bolster verification provisions that they believe are inadequate.
- **Greater information sharing on strategic offensive and defensive forces:** The transparency and predictability measures that would be included in an interim restraint regime should be supplemented by an annual exchange of data on plans for strategic force modernization and deployments.

A mutually acceptable arrangement to manage their strategic nuclear relationship should make it easier for Washington and Moscow to get a handle on conventional threats to nuclear deterrence if tensions and friction escalate over an unregulated competition in strategic nuclear arms.

A nuclear exchange between the United States and Russia is far more likely to occur as a result of a crisis or conflict that escalates out of control, either deliberately or unintentionally. Thus, the main goal of arms control should be to reduce the risk of a conflict from arising in the first place. Achieving this goal does not hinge on negotiating new legally binding control treaties. Rather, it is contingent on the ability of both sides to manage the underlying causes of their adversarial relationship.<sup>66</sup>

The European architecture for arms control and confidence-building measures has been badly damaged by the withdrawal of Russia from the CFE Treaty and Russian violations of the Vienna Document. The lack of transparency on the part of Russia, its provocative actions against NATO allies in the Baltic and Black Sea regions, and other destabilizing activities along the line of contact with NATO have become the norm on the European security landscape. These Russia's actions increase the risk of precipitating a crisis—one that would be difficult to manage in the absence of more effective crisis management mechanisms.

No compromise proposal to address this problem can ignore the fact that Russia's provocative behavior on the northern and southern flanks of Europe is not an accident, but a deliberate policy. It is intended to intimidate smaller neighbors, undermine their confidence in NATO's security guarantee, and coerce them to accept—even if tacitly—that they are in Russia's sphere. Russian behavior is also a signal to the alliance's larger members that in the Baltic and Black Sea regions they are overreaching. Russia is not interested in transparency and stability in those regions: it relies on surprise, stealth, and deception as key elements of its strategy in peacetime, in a crisis, and in the opening stages of a potential conflict.

That should come as no surprise, since the Baltic and Black Sea regions are in Russia's front yard. NATO allies' air patrols inevitably are conducted in close proximity to some of Russia's most sensitive military sites—Kaliningrad and St Petersburg in the north, and Sevastopol in the south. From the perspective of Russia's national security, it is a direct challenge. Overcoming these deeply held threat perceptions rooted in Russian strategic culture will not be easy, if at all possible.

Moreover, confidence-building measures developed in the closing years of the Cold War and early post-Cold War years have little chance of working in the new environment in Europe. It makes little sense for Russia to share insights into its doctrine, operations, and military exercises with its prospective adversaries that have designated it as the only military threat they confront.

This discussion of Russian strategic culture also suggests that the differences between Russia and the United States and its European allies are unlikely to be reconciled. This is not to say, however, that they cannot be managed. The leadership of Russia is not irrational or blindly committed to the goal of regaining its old empire. As the experience of the three decades since the end of the Cold War demonstrates, Russia's national security establishment is careful in calculating the proverbial "correlation of forces" and is averse to taking undue risks. As we have argued elsewhere, Russia's so-called adventurism has been exaggerated.<sup>67</sup> The intervention in Syria was undertaken as a relatively low-risk project once the Kremlin was assured that the United States would not intervene to topple the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The "grey zone" campaign against the West is a low-cost, low-risk and high-impact form of asymmetric warfare against a superior adversary that has the benefit of easy deniability. The entire experience of the Cold War offers further evidence that Russian national decision-making is rational and calculating. For example, the United States began deploying its INF missiles in Europe in November 1983. In November 1984, agreement was reached to resume nuclear arms control talks interrupted when the Soviets walked out in protest of the U.S. deployment.<sup>68</sup>

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The United States and Russia are approaching a similar turning point in their bilateral security relations and the evolution of European security. The development and deployment of new weapons systems—strategic, INF-range, cyber, space, anti-missile, artificial intelligence, and both nuclear and conventional hypersonic weapons—hold out the prospect of a new, highly dangerous and destabilizing arms race and an increased risk of conflict, not only between the United States and Russia but also involving Europe. It is highly unlikely that the United States and its allies and Russia will return to a relationship guided by aspirations for partnership and cooperation. That would be a major departure from the long record of competitive relations between Russia and the West. However, both sides in this relationship have a strong incentive to manage their competition and preserve strategic stability and nuclear deterrence, which are at risk of being severely upended. That shared interest in avoiding worst-case scenarios and managing their competitive relationship is the foundation upon which Russia and the West can proceed.

Since the greatest risk of a military confrontation between NATO and Russia is in the possibility of miscalculation rather than a deliberate attack, crisis management takes on special importance, no less so than the efforts of the alliance to build up its capabilities to deter and defend against an attack by Russia. Considering the importance both NATO and Russia—each for its own set of reasons—attach to the stability and security of countries that have a shared border and/or historical legacy with Russia, NATO allies need to pay special attention to political, economic, societal, and military developments in those countries, and focus their crisis management and preparedness activities on that region.

Russia will remain a formidable adversary for the United States for many years and future administrations will need to take forceful action whenever Russian behavior threatens important U.S. national interests. But the United States and its allies have an important stake in reducing the risk of war that will arise if the new strategic dynamic results in uncontrolled, unmanaged geopolitical competition and a new arms race. It will likely take years and patience, political will, leadership, vision, and diplomatic heavy lifting to build a new security environment and a political relationship between the United States and Russia that would permit new arrangements to emerge in order to manage that competition through treaties or informal arrangements. In dealing with this problem it is useful to remember that, to paraphrase H.L. Mencken, “for every problem there is one solution which is simple, neat and wrong.”

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