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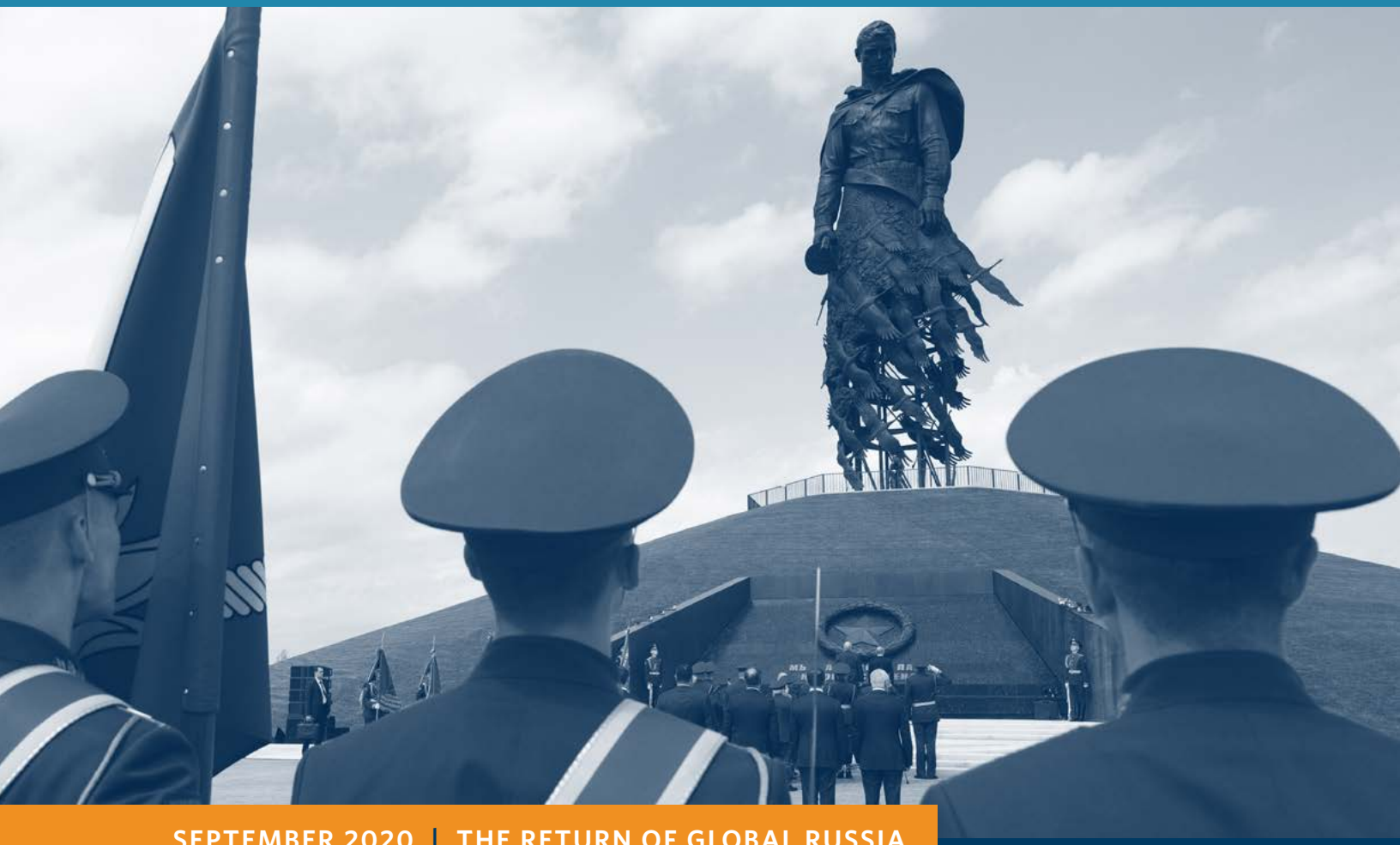

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Etched in Stone: Russian Strategic Culture and the Future of Transatlantic Security

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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 toward 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 Vladimir 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 the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since the end of 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 the United States deploying in Europe 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, Russia has experienced a significant deterioration in its strategic position in Europe following its aggression against Ukraine. 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 Conventional Forces in Europe and, shortly, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaties, the alliance has greater flexibility to operate on Russia's periphery. In the aftermath of its aggression against Ukraine, all countries on the Europe's eastern 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, Russia 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 will put at the disposal of Russia and the United States, and possibly other NATO allies, new weapons 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 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, which are based on quantitative limits and intrusive verification regimes, obsolete. Arms control will have to be entirely reconceptualized on the basis of 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 as well as to undermine the cohesion and resolve of NATO 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 makes clear that, while its policy is deeply rooted in the country's 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 this 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.

Counting on changes in the Kremlin's thinking on national security matters—or in the key concepts ingrained in Russian strategic culture over the centuries—is an unlikely proposition. Russia will remain a formidable adversary for the United States for many years, and future administrations will need to take forceful action whenever its 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 their 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."

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, which in turn guides its responses to challenges and threats.[1]

The Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 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 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, 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-à-vis Ukraine and transatlantic security in general, as well as indicators of likely future Russian responses to developments in Europe.

This paper offers an overview of the key building blocks of Russian strategic culture as it relates to Russian views on transatlantic security, examines the developments in European security since 2014 in this context, assesses their implications for Russian and U.S. security and interests, and concludes with policy implications and recommendations.

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.

The Fusion of Geography and History

To state the obvious, Russia is European.[2] 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 sixteenth century, its interests,

key relationships with other powers, and foreign and security policies have been focused on Europe. Even Russia's pursuits outside Europe—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 nineteenth 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 Europe. Since the establishment of the empire under Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century, Russian military and diplomatic history has been 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 twentieth 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 always was and will remain 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 sixteenth century—it has pursued 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 in Europe. The two nearly fatal invasions—by Napoleon's France and Hitler's Germany—are only the best-known and most dramatic examples of wars that Russia has fought in Europe. But it is easy to overlook such dramatic episodes as the occupation of Moscow by the troops of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1610 and the territorial losses and concessions in multiple, mostly forgotten wars of the seventeenth century with Poland and Sweden.

At the risk of oversimplification, one can easily conclude that the entire history of Russian foreign policy has been a struggle for control of the geographic space between the western frontier of Russia and the eastern border of Germany.

During periods of domestic instability, even turmoil, European powers capitalized on Russia's preoccupation with its internal affairs to make significant territorial gains at its expense. That was the case in the early seventeenth 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.[3]

Russia's experience of the twentieth century has much greater relevance to its strategic culture than distant historical events. Russia's retreat in Europe in 1918 and in 1991 paved the way for the establishment of several new independent states. This was widely considered elsewhere in Europe as a sign of progress that would enhance the security and stability of the continent, but that is not how these developments were perceived in Russia. The loss of its vast European possessions was equated with strategic defeat and was a major blow to the country's security and national psyche.

In the absence of natural barriers to separate Russia from the rest of Europe, and with a long legacy of conflict between it and other European countries, strategic depth has been a critical element of Russian security, saving the country from defeat in 1812 and in 1941. Regaining 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 reclaimed most of the old empire and the margin of security that came with it. Similarly, restoring 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 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 2016, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov complained that from its very origins the Russian state 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."[4] A commitment to defend the Russian identity and way of life "is in our genes," he concluded.[5]

The gap between Russia and "the European West," to use Lavrov's terminology, covers the hard-power and soft-power aspects of their relationship. Aside from the historic differences between the Russian Orthodox and Catholic churches, and despite its active participation in European power politics since the rule of Peter the Great, Russia 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 nineteenth 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 Austrian Empire.[6]

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.[7] 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.[8] 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, was interpreted by Russian nationalists and Slavophiles as proof of Europe's duplicity and inherent, incorrigible Russophobia.[9] Nikolay Danilevskiy, a leading nineteenth 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.[10]

The intellectual and political line of Russia's quest for recognition and dissatisfaction with the denial of its presumed inherent rights as a great power enjoyed by other European major powers can be traced from nineteenth century Slavophiles to twenty-first century politicians, including President Vladimir Putin.[11] In the latter's 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 the western part of Europe is part of a long and established Russian narrative.

A Shared Worldview

The sense of grievance against the "European West" and, by association, the United States, is a prominent feature of the entrenched worldview broadly shared by Russia's national security establishment—reaffirmed by 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 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.[12]

Decisionmaking on national security and foreign policy 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 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.[13] In the Soviet Union, the Communist Party leadership guided policy with inputs and support from the bureaucracy, including the military, diplomatic, intelligence, and academic communities.[14] The direction and tenor of Russian and Soviet foreign policy have always been determined at the top of the political-bureaucratic pyramid. Under Putin, the Security Council appears to include the president's circle of close advisers and to be where major foreign policy issues are considered and decided.[15]

For Putin and senior national security decisionmakers of his generation, mostly men in their sixties 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.[16] 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 the world's largest nuclear arsenal, 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 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.[17] 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.[18]

The collapse of that state, political system, and ideology was complete and sudden. For generations of national 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 state's adversaries to subvert it from within. For many of them, the Cold War, after a brief interlude in the 1990s, has continued because in their eyes the West, not content with the breakup of the Soviet Union, has waged a campaign against Russia. The aims of that campaign are two-fold: to weaken Russia and encircle it with hostile neighbors by means of sponsoring "color revolutions" and expanding NATO, and to further subvert Russia from within by supporting nongovernmental organizations, promoting hostile, pseudo-liberal ideologies, and corroding the traditional values of Russian culture and society.[19] In this narrative, the ultimate goal of the West's policy toward Russia is to stage a "color coup."[20] In other words, the "velvet" revolutions of 1989, the breakup of the Soviet Union, the expansion of NATO, and the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine were part and parcel of the West's long-term campaign against the Soviet Union and Russia.

The Great Patriotic War

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 rests Russian claims to recognition as a great power and to a 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 constitution in 2020, some politicians even proposed a special amendment that would affirm the status of Russia as a "country-victor" in the conflict.[21] The proposal earned a favorable comment from Putin, but eventually was shelved.[22]

In the Kremlin's narrative, Russia, as a "country-victor" in World War II, which gave rise to the international system that exists today, as a founding member of the United Nations, and as a major nuclear power, bears special responsibility for the legacy of the war.[23] This includes ensuring the correct historical record of the war and defending it against attempts at falsification, upholding the postwar international system, and building a stable world order. Putin 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.[24] In an unprecedented move, he even published earlier this year a lengthy article in a U.S. policy journal to once again highlight the special Soviet contribution to victory and the long-standing, historic animosity of the West toward the Soviet Union and Russia.[25] 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 its ambitions, and the main source of its insecurity.

Russian Threat Perceptions

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

Then

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 even East Germany represented the pinnacle of power and influence on the continent for the Russian state. The empire's vast expanse also provided strategic depth and a degree of security from adversaries in the West that was unprecedented. 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.[26] Although this was to be done "primarily through economic and financial aid,"[27] 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.

In addition to the military and covert action toolkit deployed to counter that perceived array of threats, the Soviet Union 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 thirty-five 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 afterward. The rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland in 1980 threatened the Soviet Union's hold on a satellite that was critical to its position in 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 of ground-launched cruise missiles, 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 strike the Soviet heartland with its intermediate-range arsenal, while its strategic forces remained outside the range of intermediate-range Soviet missiles. The United States would 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 1983, when the Reagan administration launched the Strategic Defense Initiative. 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 the IRBM deployments in Europe.[28] In retrospect, these may seem like abstract and highly unrealistic arguments. But in the context of the nuclear arms race at the time, they could not be overlooked.

And Now

Three decades later, Russia's national security establishment faces most of the same threats that their predecessors faced in the 1980s—except that they see these as even worse. Russia has lost strategic depth. An alliance it considers to be hostile has expanded to within a short distance of its heartland and is considering deploying weapons systems that it is powerless to defend against. On its immediate periphery, Russia faces countries that are either 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.[29] The strategic predicament the Kremlin finds itself in is 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 two decades, the combined effects of the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the breakup of the Soviet Union, and NATO enlargement have placed the boundary between Russia and the rest of Europe—almost all of its countries 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.[30]

Ukraine is now an adversary after the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the start of the war in eastern Ukraine. Belarus, nominally an ally with Russia in the Union State the two countries launched in 1996, has had a complicated relationship with its partner. When the annexation of Crimea raised the specter of similar actions against other former Soviet states, Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko pushed back against Putin's pressure for closer ties with Russia in the name of Eurasian integration.[31] The mass protests that broke out against Lukashenko's seemingly endless rule in August 2020 across the entire country after decades of stagnant authoritarian politics must have only added to the Kremlin's discomfort in dealing with this strategically important neighbor. Although lacking an anti-Russian theme, the protests' pro-democracy nature is certain to feed the Kremlin's fear of unrest around its periphery and Western influence, and doubts about the loyalty of its allies and partners.

Poland, which has a border with the Russian province of Kaliningrad, has been a leading, strident voice within NATO arguing for an increased U.S. forward presence to deter and defend against Russia.[32] 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.[33] The United States is poised to address Polish concerns by deploying an additional 1,000 troops to the country.[34] 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 long sought.[35]

Few Russian military activities in Europe have generated more discussion in Western media and policy circles than the deployment in the Baltic region of significant anti-access/area-denial capabilities.[36] The purpose is to blunt any advantage NATO air forces might have, deny NATO allies access to the three 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.[37] 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, standoff weapons, electronic countermeasures, cyberattacks against command-and-control systems, or use of decoys.[38]

Within the context of its strategic culture, Russia today is worse off than it was during the Cold War. For its national security establishment, the expansion of NATO, the transformation of its periphery into a belt of states that are hostile to 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 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. But by any objective measure, based on the results of its activities over three decades, Russia has played a weak hand rather poorly in Europe since the end of the Cold War. Judging by its own metrics, it 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 main outcomes of Russia's post–Cold War diplomacy has been the destruction of the security architecture in Europe developed during the Cold War, especially during its final stages. This includes the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

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 breakup 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.[39] In 2007, Russia, frustrated by several European states' refusal to ratify the adapted CFE 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.[40]

The withdrawal prompted concerns in Europe—against the backdrop of the war in eastern Ukraine—about the deteriorating security environment and the threat of military action by Russia against its other neighbors, especially those not covered by NATO's security guarantee. However, with the new geography of the NATO-Russia standoff, 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 smaller because of the loss of the former Western republics of the Soviet Union 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.

The most important blow to the European security architecture was Russia's deployment several years ago of the SSC-8/9M729 ground-launched cruise missile with a range of 2,500 kilometers in violation of the INF Treaty.[41] In 2014, the United States raised its concerns with Russia about the missile, which Russia claimed was not violating the treaty.[42] All NATO members backed the U.S. charge that Russia had violated the treaty.[43] Having failed to resolve this disagreement with Russia, the United States withdrew from the INF Treaty in August 2019.[44]

The SSC-8 deployment and the subsequent demise of the INF Treaty, which senior Russian officials had long threatened to quit—describing it 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.[45]

In 2019, the United States conducted tests of ground-based ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges previously banned by the INF Treaty.[46] If deployed—possibly, even if far from likely, in Poland—they would carry conventional warheads.[47] Over time, the combination of their range, mobility, and precision could put 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.[48]

The potential introduction into this mix of hypersonic weapons would further underscore Russian vulnerability.[49] Some Russian experts view this possibility as a major threat to their country's security.[50] It is unlikely that NATO would approve the deployment of INF-class missiles on the territory of its members, especially with 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 their 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."[51] The deployment by NATO in the three formerly Soviet-occupied Baltic states of three battalion-sized battle groups and a brigade-sized battle group in Poland may or may not be considered a violation of this pledge: it is a mix of rotational and permanent deployments.[52] 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 potential victim of the breakdown in the relationship between NATO and Russia is the alliance's 1997 pledge not to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new 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."[53] The prospect of U.S. nuclear weapons being deployed in Poland, as previously mentioned, remains highly remote and subject to a whole host of strategic, military, and political considerations as a matter of NATO policy and of 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, in which major war in Europe was unthinkable and 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 echoed by some Western analysts as well.[54] The invasion of Ukraine changed that.

No doubt, NATO still has a long way to go to meet its own targets on spending, readiness, or new capabilities, but for the first time in a generation it faces a real adversary in the European theater. While the possibility of a deliberate conflict with Russia is still distant, the requirement to defend

vulnerable allies along the 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."[55] Gone is the upbeat language of the last Strategic Concept, from 2010, which declared that "the Euro-Atlantic area is at peace and the threat of a conventional attack against NATO territory is low."[56] Gone also is the language about "a true strategic partnership between NATO and Russia." The top priority now is "continuing to invest in defense and in the capabilities the Alliance needs."[57] The alliance in 2020 bears little resemblance to the one that existed prior to 2014, even though there are profound (and often difficult to bridge) internal differences 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 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.[58] In May 2020, U.S. strategic bombers conducted an exercise with the air forces of Sweden and Norway in these countries' airspace.[59]

Beyond Europe

The fallout from developments in the European theater and in technological innovation threatens another key feature of the transatlantic Cold War–era security architecture—U.S.-Russian strategic stability and arms control. These two critical elements are unraveling too.

The End of Arms Control as We Know It

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 with extensive verification measures—not only the INF Treaty but also the Strategic Arms Limitation (SALT), Strategic Arms Reduction (START), and the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaties.[60] The exception 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—New START—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 violations of the INF Treaty have poisoned the climate in the United States for negotiating new treaties until these are resolved to Washington's satisfaction.[61] 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 which party 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—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:

- It focused almost exclusively on each side's development and deployment of strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons.

- With the notable exception of the PNIs, it featured the negotiation of formal, legally binding treaties with extensive verification.

- The U.S.-Russian approach to arms control concerned itself primarily with quantitative rather than qualitative limits.

- Perhaps most importantly, the two sides defined strategic stability relatively narrowly as a condition in which neither had an incentive to use nuclear weapons first.

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. The United States and Russia should agree to the unconditional extension of New START and

begin talks on a follow on strategic arms control treaty. But 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. 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 treaties. Many of them are capable of carrying out conventional and nuclear operations, and the types of warhead the new platforms will carry are 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 novel technologies and systems will 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 face 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 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 across the board.

Threats to Strategic Stability

The integration of new conventional weapons technologies into the arsenals and war-fighting plans of the United States and Russia is bound to affect their threat perceptions. The following scenario could be highly destabilizing: a decapitating first strike against strategic command-and-control 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.

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.[62] As previously noted, some of the new conventional weapons can be delivered from the same platforms as nuclear warheads, making it nearly impossible to determine whether they are carrying either type. This "warhead ambiguity" will be more prevalent and worrisome in the future as the United States and Russia 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.[63] 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.[64]

These technical and doctrinal innovations pose new threats to European security. They could compromise crisis stability in the conventional military balance in Europe. 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 NATO's eastern flank and Russia 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 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 the United States or Russia or both might be tempted to believe that limited tactical nuclear weapon strikes could stave off conventional defeat, raising in turn the risk of strategic nuclear escalation. Hence Russia's flirtation with the "escalate to de-escalate" notion, which has been echoed in its recently released official paper on nuclear deterrence.[65]

Threats to Arms Race Stability

Arms race stability is typically defined as the absence of incentives to build up nuclear forces, qualitatively or quantitatively.[66] Three developments could create such incentives. First, the demise of New START and the inability of the United States and Russia 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 U.S. 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: an arms race 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.

Conclusions and Implications

Looking ahead, it is tempting to hope that changes in Russia's domestic politics or its economic difficulties will trigger shifts in its foreign policy similar to those of the Gorbachev era, and consequently that East-West relations will improve dramatically. However, the framework of Russian strategic culture suggests that such a turn of events is highly unlikely for three reasons.

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 cannot change, but it is unlikely to change as a result of domestic political shifts, which in Russia's case have 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 above discussion of Russia's strategic culture, the country's national security policy has long emphasized control over the periphery and preventing other powers from establishing their foothold there. The invasion of Ukraine is but the latest example of overreaction by Russia's leaders to the threat, as they 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 conventional and nuclear technologies holds the promise of revolutionary changes in transatlantic security. These changes will likely make obsolete most, if not all, existing approaches to strategic stability and arms control as well as 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 conventional and nuclear arms control, strategic stability, and theater-wide European security is needed.

The technical approach to arms control, which 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 apolitical. It 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 put at risk targets in the Russian heartland—a 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 deployment of U.S. INF-range systems in Europe in response. The differences between the 1980s and the 2020s, however, are that Russia no longer has the buffer of Eastern Europe and the western republics of the Soviet Union 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 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. Such arrangements could take the two following forms.

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 they 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 the United States and Russia 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 them 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.[67]

Transparency and Confidence-Building—Gone and Mostly Forgotten

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

No compromise proposal to address this problem can ignore the fact that Russia's provocative behavior 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 of influence. Russia's behavior is also a signal to the alliance's larger members that they are overreaching in the Baltic and Black Sea regions. 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's Baltic Air Policing missions, carried out by over a dozen members, 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, they are 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 suggests that the differences between Russia and the United States and its European allies are unlikely to be reconciled. This is not to say that they cannot be managed. The leadership of Russia is not irrational or blindly committed to the goal of regaining the 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 correlation of forces and is averse to taking undue risks.

As one of us has argued elsewhere, Russia's so-called adventurism has been exaggerated.[68] Its 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 "gray 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 experience of the Cold War offers further evidence that Russian decisionmaking is rational and calculating. For example, in November 1983, to counter the Soviet Union deploying its SS-20 intermediate range missiles in Europe, the United States began deploying its INF-range Pershing II ballistic missiles and ground-launched cruise missiles. In response, Soviet officials walked out of nuclear arms control talks and tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States and its allies escalated amid heightened fears of war. Undeterred NATO allies continued with the deployment. In November 1984, when it became clear that Soviet pressure had not forced NATO to back down, Moscow agreed to resume nuclear arms control talks, ultimately leading to the INF Treaty.[69]

The United States and Russia are today approaching a similar turning point in their security relations and in the evolution of European security. The development and deployment of new weapons systems—strategic, INF-range, cyber, space, anti-missile, artificial intelligence, and 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 European countries. 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 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 NATO and Russia—each for its own reasons—attach to the stability and security of countries that have a border and/or shared 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 them.

Russia will remain a formidable adversary for the United States for many years, and future administrations will need to take forceful action whenever its behavior threatens important U.S. 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 an 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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