

Europe

The resurgence of an aggressive, belligerent Russia has thrown conventional post-Cold War thinking into the waste bin. Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine and annex Crimea has changed post-Cold War norms. From the Arctic to the Baltics, Ukraine, and the South Caucasus, Russia has proven to be the source of much instability in Europe. Despite economic problems, Russia continues to prioritize the rebuilding of its military and funding for its military operations abroad. Russia's military and political antagonism toward the United States continues unabated, and its efforts to undermine U.S. institutions and the NATO alliance are serious and troubling. Russia's aggressive stance in a number of theaters, including the Balkans, Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine, continues to contribute to destabilization and run counter to U.S. interests.

Russian Military Capabilities. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), among the key weapons in Russia's inventory are 324 intercontinental ballistic missiles; 2,700 main battle tanks; and more than 4,900 armored infantry fighting vehicles, 6,100 armored personnel carriers, and 4,316 pieces of artillery. The navy has one aircraft carrier; 62 submarines (including 13 ballistic missile submarines); five cruisers; 15 destroyers; 12 frigates; and 95 patrol and coastal combatants. The air force has 1,046 combat-capable aircraft. The IISS counts 270,000 members of the army. Russia also has a total reserve force of 2,000,000 for all armed forces.¹

To avoid political blowback from military deaths abroad, Russia has increasingly

deployed paid private volunteer troops trained at Special Forces bases and often under the command of Russian Special Forces. Russia has used such volunteers in Libya, Syria, and Ukraine because "[t]hey not only provide the Kremlin with plausible political deniability but also apparently take casualties the Russian authorities do not report."²

Another key development in Russian force structure occurred in July 2016 when Vladimir Putin signed a law creating a 340,000-strong (both civilian and military) National Guard over which he will have direct control³ and which will be responsible for "enforcing emergency-situation regimes, combating terrorism, defending Russian territory, and protecting state facilities and assets."⁴ According to reports, the National Guard was crafted by amalgamating "several different domestic security forces" under presidential control. Although Putin could issue a directive to deploy the force abroad,⁵ forces are more likely to be used to stifle domestic dissent.

Hamstrung by low oil prices, economic sanctions, and deep structural issues, Russia's economy is projected to produce only tepid growth of 1.4 percent in 2017.⁶ The combined impact of Western sanctions and Ukraine's decision to end delivery of military products and components to Russia in 2014 have hurt the ability of Russia's defense industries to access certain technology and components.⁷ Overall, Russia's industrial capacity and capability remain problematic. In 2017, Russia's defense budget was cut 25.5 percent. "Despite the cut," however, "the 2017 budget will remain about 14.4% higher than the level of defence spending

seen in 2014 in nominal terms.”⁸ Nevertheless, the macroeconomic situation in Russia has had an impact on defense: “In real terms, projected total military expenditure is estimated to fall by 9.5% in 2017 and by 7.1% in 2018, and then by a more modest 1.7% in 2019.”⁹ Russia continues to seek cuts elsewhere to safeguard its procurement and modernization plans.¹⁰

Russia has been investing heavily in modernization of its armed forces, especially its nuclear arsenal and navy. As of December 2016, 60 percent of Russia’s nuclear forces had been modernized.¹¹ According to the IISS:

Upgrades to Russia’s land- and sea-based strategic nuclear forces continue with plans to update 40 missiles a year. In 2015, 21 Yars intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) were delivered to the Strategic Missile Troops, along with about ten Bulava submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and the same number of Liner (upgraded Sineva) SLBMs.¹²

Russia has announced that the new RS-28 ballistic missile, commissioned in 2011, will come into service in 2018 as planned.¹³ The armed forces also continue to undergo process modernization begun by Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov in 2008.¹⁴ Russia projects that by the end of 2017, 62 percent of Russian military equipment in service will be modern.¹⁵ In March 2017, Russia announced life extension programs for its *Akula*-class and *Oscar II*-class nuclear-powered submarines, which operate in both the Northern and Pacific Fleets.¹⁶ However, problems remain:

The naval shipbuilding industry has suffered from years of neglect and under investment; while the Ukraine crisis and the imposition of sanctions is starting to have an effect. The refurbishment of existing naval vessels is progressing, albeit at a slower, and more expensive, pace than originally envisaged. Although several new frigates, corvettes and submarines have already entered service, delivery of new vessels is behind schedule.¹⁷

After years of delays, the Russian Navy expects to commission two stealth guided missile

frigates and a logistic ship in 2017.¹⁸ However, according to some analysts, tight budgets and an inability to procure parts from Ukrainian industry make it unlikely that Russia will procure the 16 guided missile frigates in keeping with its stated intention.¹⁹ The buildup of Russia’s Northern Fleet has implications beyond the immediate theater. “In 2016,” according to one report, “the aircraft carrier *Kuznetsov* transited from the Kola Peninsula and into the Mediterranean Sea to conduct strikes against targets in Syria in support of the Assad regime.”²⁰ The carrier was joined in the Mediterranean by the “Pyotr Veliky nuclear-powered battle cruiser, anti-submarine destroyer *Severomorsk*, the destroyer *Vice-Admiral Kulakov*, a tug, a surveillance vessel and a tanker,” all based out of the Kola peninsula.²¹

Transport remains a nagging problem, and Russia’s Defense Minister has stressed the paucity of Russian transport vessels. In March, Russia reportedly needed to purchase civilian cargo vessels and use icebreakers to transport troops and equipment to Syria at the beginning of major operations in support of the Assad regime.²²

Russian officials have announced a follow-on modernization program, the State Armament Program 2018–2025. Though budget shortfalls have hampered modernization efforts overall, analysts believe that Russia will continue to focus on developing high-end systems such as the S-500 surface-to-air missile system and T-50 fighter jet²³ and that, although “the new State Armaments Program to 2025 will be less well funded on the whole than its earlier version,” it “will continue to support the modernization of the force structure with a special emphasis on high-technology assets.”²⁴ Russia’s new armaments program prioritizes nuclear modernization, submarine development, and fighter aircraft at the expense of procuring a new aircraft carrier and nuclear-powered destroyers, acquisition of which has been postponed.²⁵

Russian Exercises. Russian military exercises, especially snap exercises, are a source of serious concern because they have masked

real military operations in the past. In 2013, Russia reintroduced snap exercises, which are conducted with little or no warning and often involve thousands of troops and pieces of equipment.²⁶ In February 2017, for example, Russia ordered snap exercises involving 45,000 troops, 150 aircraft, and 200 anti-aircraft pieces.²⁷

Snap exercises have been used for military campaigns as well. According to General Curtis Scaparrotti, NATO Supreme Allied Commander and Commander, U.S. European Command (EUCOM), “the annexation of Crimea took place in connection with a snap exercise by Russia.”²⁸ Snap exercises have practiced additional aggression against Ukraine. According to the IISS:

The largest of these took place in August 2016, with three military districts—Southern, Western and Central—simultaneously put on alert, along with the Northern Fleet and the airborne troops. The aim of this inspection was to practise the concentration of forces in the southwestern part of Russia for potential contingencies in the Caucasus and against Ukraine.²⁹

Snap exercises also provide Russian leadership with a hedge against unpreparedness or corruption. “In addition to affording combat-training benefits,” the IISS reports, “snap inspections appear to be of increasing importance as a measure against corruption or deception. As a result of a snap inspection in the Baltic Fleet in June 2016, the fleet’s commander, chief of staff and dozens of high-ranking officers were dismissed.”³⁰

In September, Russia and Belarus will conduct Zapad 2017, a massive exercise in Russia’s Western military district, Kaliningrad, and Belarus, the last iteration of which took place in 2013. Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander General Philip Breedlove has estimated that 100,000 troops will take place in Zapad 17.³¹ Russia has claimed that only 13,000 troops will participate and that only 3,000 of those troops and 280 pieces of equipment will be Russian.³² Yet it plans to use around 4,000

train cars to transport troops to Belarus for the exercises—enough for around 30,000 troops—and additional forces are likely to be moved by air transport.³³ Russia reportedly “plans to involve chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBKN) military units in the exercise.”³⁴ Estonian Defence Minister Margus Tsahkna believes that Russia may plan to leave significant forces in Belarus following the exercises: “For Russian troops going to Belarus, it is a one-way ticket.”³⁵

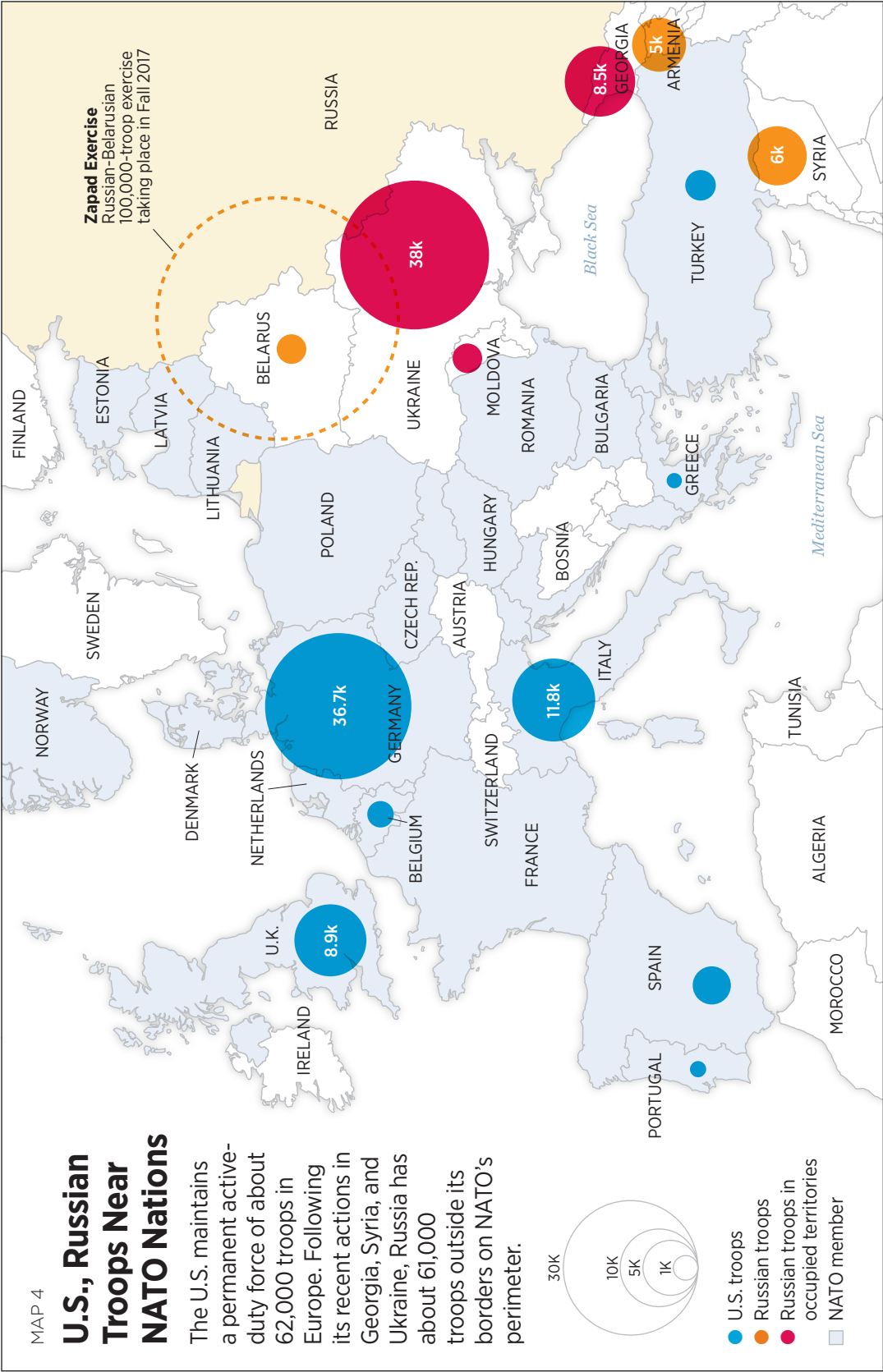
Zapad 17 will take part while Swedish exercises are concurrently ongoing with 19,000 troops, including American troops. According to Lieutenant General Ben Hodges, Commander of U.S. Army Europe, “We will be alert, we will be very vigilant. But we don’t want it to turn into a face-off during their biggest exercise of the year.”³⁶

Threats to the Homeland

Russia is the only state adversary in the region that possesses the capability to threaten the U.S. homeland with both conventional and nonconventional means. Although there is no indication that Russia plans to use its capabilities against the United States absent a broader conflict involving America’s NATO allies, the plausible potential for such a scenario serves to sustain the strategic importance of those capabilities. Russia’s explicitly belligerent behavior during the past year further adds to the need for the U.S. to give due consideration to Russia’s ability to place the security of the U.S. at risk.³⁷

Russia’s National Security Strategy, released in December 2015, describes NATO as a threat to the national security of the Russian Federation:

The buildup of the military potential of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the endowment of it with global functions pursued in violation of the norms of international law, the galvanization of the bloc countries’ military activity, the further expansion of the alliance, and the location of its military infrastructure closer to Russian borders are creating a threat to national security.³⁸



The document also clearly states that Russia will use every means at its disposal to achieve its strategic goals: “Interrelated political, military, military-technical, diplomatic, economic, informational, and other measures are being developed and implemented in order to ensure strategic deterrence and the prevention of armed conflicts.”³⁹ In December 2014, Putin signed a new version of Russia’s military doctrine emphasizing the claimed threat of NATO and global strike systems to Russia.⁴⁰

Russian Strategic Nuclear Threat. Russia possesses the largest arsenal of nuclear weapons among the nuclear powers (when short-range nuclear weapons are included). It is one of the few nations with the capability to destroy many targets in the U.S. homeland and in U.S.-allied nations and to threaten and prevent free access to the commons by other nations. Russia has both intercontinental-range and short-range ballistic missiles and a varied nuclear weapons arsenal that can be delivered by sea, land, and air. It also is investing significant resources in modernizing its arsenal and maintaining the skills of its workforce.

Russia is currently relying on its nuclear arsenal to ensure its invincibility against any enemy, intimidate European powers, and deter counters to its predatory behavior in its “near abroad,” primarily in Ukraine but also concerning the Baltic States.⁴¹ This arsenal serves as a protective umbrella under which Russia can modernize its conventional forces at a deliberate pace. While its nuclear deterrent protects Russia from a large-scale attack, Russia also needs a modern and flexible military to fight local wars such as those against Georgia in 2008 and the ongoing war against Ukraine that began in 2014. Under Russian military doctrine, the use of nuclear weapons in conventional local and regional wars is seen as de-escalatory because it would cause an enemy to concede defeat. In May, for example, a Russian parliamentarian threatened that nuclear weapons might be used if the U.S. or NATO were to move to retake Crimea or defend eastern Ukraine.⁴²

General Scaparrotti discussed the risks of Russian use of tactical nuclear weapons in his March 23, 2017, EUCOM posture statement: “Most concerning...is Moscow’s substantial inventory of non-strategic nuclear weapons in the EUCOM AOR [Area of Responsibility] and its troubling doctrine that calls on the potential use of these weapons to escalate its way out of a failing conflict.”⁴³

Particularly worrisome are Moscow’s plans for rail-based nuclear-armed missiles, which are very difficult to detect. The missiles are scheduled to begin testing in 2019 and to become operational in 2020. Russia reportedly plans to deploy five regiments with a total of 30 railroad ICBMs: six missiles per regiment.⁴⁴ The Defense Ministry states that the new armed forces structure is being created with the goal of increased flexibility, mobility, and readiness for combat in limited-scale conflicts. Strategic Rocket Forces are the first line of defense (and offense) against Russia’s great-power counterparts.⁴⁵

Russia has two strategies for nuclear deterrence. The first is based on a threat of massive launch-on-warning and retaliatory strikes to deter a nuclear attack; the second is based on a threat of limited demonstration and “de-escalation” nuclear strikes to deter or terminate a large-scale conventional war.⁴⁶ Russia’s reliance on nuclear weapons is based partly on their small cost relative to conventional weapons (especially in terms of their effect) and on Russia’s inability to attract sufficient numbers of high-quality servicemembers. Thus, Russia sees its nuclear weapons as a way to offset the lower quantity and quality of its conventional forces.

Moscow has repeatedly threatened U.S. allies in Europe with nuclear deployments and even preemptive nuclear strikes.⁴⁷ The Russians justify their aggressive behavior by pointing to deployments of U.S. missile defense systems in Europe even though these systems are not scaled or postured to mitigate Russia’s advantage in ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons to any significant degree.

Russia continues to violate the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty,

which bans the testing, production, and possession of intermediate-range missiles.⁴⁸ In early 2017, Russia fully deployed the SSC-X-8 Cruise Missile in violation of the INF treaty. One battalion with the cruise missile remains at a missile test site in southern Russia, and another battalion with the missile deployed to an operational base in December 2016. U.S. officials acknowledge that the banned cruise missiles are no longer in the testing phase and now consider them to be fully operational.⁴⁹ In March, General Paul Selva, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testified that Russia's cruise missile deployment "violates the spirit and intent of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty" and "presents a risk to most of our facilities in Europe."⁵⁰

WWTA: The 2017 WWTA states that "Russia has developed a ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) that the United States has declared is in violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty." Moreover, "[d]espite Russia's ongoing development of other Treaty-compliant missiles with intermediate ranges, Moscow probably believes that the new GLCM provides sufficient military advantages that make it worth risking the political repercussions of violating the INF Treaty."⁵¹

Summary: The sizable Russian nuclear arsenal remains the only threat to the existence of the U.S. homeland emanating from Europe and Eurasia. While the potential for use of this arsenal remains low, the fact that Russia continues to threaten Europe with nuclear attack demonstrates that it will continue to play a central strategic role in shaping both Russia's military and political thinking and its level of aggressive behavior beyond its borders.

Threat of Regional War

To many U.S. allies, Russia does pose a threat. At times, this threat is of a military nature. At other times, Russia uses less conventional tactics such as cyber-attacks, utilization of energy resources, and propaganda. Today as in Imperial times, Russia's influence is exerted by both the pen and the sword. Organizations like the Collective Security Treaty Organization

(CSTO) or Eurasia Economic Union attempt to bind regional capitals to Moscow through a series of agreements and treaties.

Espionage is another tool that Russia uses in ways that are damaging to U.S. interests. In May 2016, a Russian spy was sentenced to prison for gathering intelligence for the Russian SVR intelligence agency while working as a banker in New York. The spy specifically transmitted intelligence on "potential U.S. sanctions against Russian banks and the United States' efforts to develop alternative energy resources."⁵² In May 2016, a senior intelligence official from Portugal working for the Portuguese Security Intelligence Service was arrested for passing secrets to the Russian Federation, especially classified NATO intelligence and material.

Russian intelligence operatives are reportedly mapping U.S. telecommunications infrastructure around the United States near fiber optic cables.⁵³ In March 2017, the U.S. charged four people including two Russian intelligence officials with directing hacks of user data for Yahoo and Google accounts.⁵⁴ In December 2016, the U.S. expelled 35 Russian intelligence operatives, closed two compounds in Maryland and New York that were used for espionage, and levied additional economic sanctions against individuals who took part in interfering in the U.S. election.⁵⁵ Russia has also used its relations with friendly nations for espionage purposes. In April, Nicaragua began using a Russian-provided satellite station at Managua that the Nicaraguan government denies is for spying but is still of concern to the U.S.⁵⁶

There are four areas of critical interest to the U.S. in the European region where Russia poses a direct threat: Central and Eastern Europe, the Arctic or High North, the Balkans, and the South Caucasus.

Russian Pressure on Central and Eastern Europe. Moscow poses a security challenge to members of NATO that border Russia. Although the likelihood of a conventional Russian attack against the Baltic States is low, primarily because it would trigger a NATO response, Russia has used nonconventional

means to apply pressure to and sow discord among these countries. The Baltic States continue to view Russia as a significant threat. Lithuania's 2017 National Security Threat Assessment states that Russia is currently "capable to conduct combat activities against the Baltic States with 24–48 hrs. notice."⁵⁷

After World War I, the three Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania proclaimed their independence, and by 1923, the U.S. had granted full recognition to all three. In June 1940, as part of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, Soviet troops entered and occupied the three Baltic countries. A month later, acting U.S. Secretary of State Sumner Welles issued what was later to be known as the Welles Declaration, condemning Russia's occupation and stating America's refusal to recognize the legitimacy of Soviet control of these three states. The three states regained their independence with the end of the Cold War.

Due to decades of Russian domination, the Baltic States factor Russia into their military planning and foreign policy formulation in a way that is simply unimaginable in many Western European countries and North America. Estonia and Latvia have sizable ethnic Russian populations, and there is concern that Russia might exploit the situation as a pretext for aggression. This view is not without merit, considering Moscow's irredentist rhetoric and Russia's use of this technique to annex Crimea.

Russia has also demonstrated a willingness to use military force to change the borders of modern Europe. When Kremlin-backed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych failed to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union (EU) in 2013, months of street demonstrations led to his ouster early in 2014. Russia responded by violating Ukraine's territorial integrity, sending troops, aided by pro-Russian local militia, to occupy the Crimean Peninsula under the pretext of "protecting Russian people." This led to Russia's eventual annexation of Crimea, the first such forcible annexation of territory in Europe since the Second World War.⁵⁸

Russia's annexation of Crimea has de facto halved Ukraine's coastline, and Russia has claimed rights to underwater resources off the Crimean Peninsula.⁵⁹ Russia currently can supply Crimea only by air and sea. Construction has begun on a planned 11.8-mile bridge to connect the Crimean Peninsula with Russia by road and rail at a cost of \$3.2 billion to \$4.3 billion,⁶⁰ but there are significant doubts about the project's economic viability and timeline to completion, as well as the suitability of the strait as a site for a bridge.⁶¹ Russia has deployed 28,000 troops to Crimea and has embarked on a major program to build housing, restore airfields, and install new radars there.⁶² In addition, control of Crimea has allowed Russia to use the Black Sea as a platform to launch and support naval operations in the Gulf of Aden and the Eastern Mediterranean.⁶³ Russia has allocated \$1 billion to modernize the Black Sea fleet by 2020 and has stationed additional warships there including two equipped with Caliber-NK long-range cruise missiles.⁶⁴ Caliber cruise missiles have a range of at least 2,500km, placing cities from Rome to Vilnius within range of Black Sea-based cruise missiles.⁶⁵ In August 2016, Russia deployed S-400 air defense systems with a potential range of around 250 miles to Crimea.⁶⁶

In eastern Ukraine, Russia has helped to foment and sustain a separatist movement. Backed, armed, and trained by Russia, separatist leaders in eastern Ukraine have declared the so-called Lugansk People's Republic and Donetsk People's Republic. Russia has backed separatist factions in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine with advanced weapons, technical and financial assistance, and Russian conventional and special operations forces. Russian-backed separatists daily violate the September 2014 and February 2015 cease-fire agreements, known respectively as Minsk I and Minsk II.⁶⁷ Of the 10,000 deaths produced by the war, approximately a third have occurred since the signing of Minsk II.⁶⁸ Alexander Hug, chief of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine,

described the fighting in and around Avdiivka in January 2017 as “the worst fighting we’ve seen in Ukraine since 2014 and early 2015.”⁶⁹ Ukrainian troops have been on the receiving end of Russian propaganda. In February, for instance, Ukrainian troops received text messages with such threats as “You are just meat to your commanders,” “Your body will be found when the snow melts,” and “You’re like the Germans in Stalingrad.”⁷⁰

The Minsk cease-fire agreements have led to the de facto partition of Ukraine and have created a frozen conflict that remains both deadly and advantageous for Russia. General Scaparrotti described the seriousness of the situation in his 2017 EUCOM posture statement:

Recently in eastern Ukraine, Russia controls the battle tempo, again ratcheting up the number of daily violations of the cease fire and—even more concerning—directing combined Russian-separatist forces to target civilian infrastructure and threaten and intimidate OSCE monitors in order to turn up the pressure on Ukraine. Furthermore, Moscow’s support for so-called “separatists” in eastern Ukraine destabilizes Kyiv’s political structures....⁷¹

Extensive Russian cyber-attacks against Ukraine (more than 6,500 in the last two months of 2016 alone) have targeted government ministries, as well as the energy grid and industrial processes such as the monitoring of oil and gas pipelines.⁷² Russia is also employing espionage and misinformation to derail Ukraine. In October 2016, for example, Ukraine announced that it had arrested a Ukrainian on charges of spying for Russian military intelligence.⁷³ Moscow’s poor track record in implementing cease-fires should raise doubts among those who expected that Russia would not use its influence to control the separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Russia is still in violation of the 2008 peace agreement signed to end the war against Georgia. Russian troops are still based in areas where they are not supposed to be, and Moscow continues to prevent international

observers from crossing into South Ossetia and Abkhazia even though they patrol freely in the rest of Georgia.

In Moldova, Russia supports the breakaway enclave of Transnistria, where yet another frozen conflict festers to Moscow’s liking. According to EUCOM’s 2017 posture statement:

Russia has employed a decades-long strategy of indirect action to coerce, destabilize, and otherwise exercise a malign influence over other nations. In neighboring states, Russia continues to fuel “protracted conflicts.” In Moldova, for example, Russia has yet to follow through on its 1999 Istanbul summit commitments to withdraw an estimated 1,500 troops—whose presence has no mandate—from the Moldovan breakaway region of Transnistria. Russia asserts that it will remove its force once a comprehensive settlement to the Transnistrian conflict has been reached. However, Russia continued to undermine the discussion of a comprehensive settlement to the Transnistrian conflict at the 5+2 negotiations.⁷⁴

Whether in Georgia, eastern Ukraine, or Moldova, it is in Russia’s interests to keep these conflicts frozen. Russia derives much of its regional influence from these conflicts, and bringing them to a peaceful conclusion would decrease Russia’s influence in the region.

The other countries in Central and Eastern Europe also see Russia as a threat, although to varying degrees. Most tend to rely almost completely on Russia for their energy resources, some have felt the sharp end of Russian aggression in the past, and all were once in the Warsaw Pact and fear being forced back into a similar arrangement. Such historical experiences inevitably have shaped Russia’s image throughout Central and Eastern Europe.

In November 2016, Russia announced that deployments of advanced mobile S-400 air defense systems and mobile short-range ballistic missile systems including Iskander missiles in the Kaliningrad Oblast exclave would be permanent.⁷⁵ There have been reports that it has deployed tactical nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad.⁷⁶ Russia also has outfitted a missile brigade in Luga, Russia, a mere 74 miles from

the Estonian city of Narva, with Iskander missiles.⁷⁷ Recently, Russian military officials have reportedly asked manufacturers to increase the range of the Iskander missiles and improve their accuracy.⁷⁸ Moreover, Russia is not deploying missiles only in Europe. In November 2016, Russia announced that it had stationed Bal and Bastion missile systems on the Kurile islands of Iturup and Kunashir, which are also claimed by Japan.⁷⁹

Russia has deployed additional troops and capabilities near its western borders. Bruno Kahl, head of the German Federal Intelligence Service, stated in March 2017 that “Russia has doubled its fighting power on its Western border, which cannot be considered as defensive against the West.”⁸⁰ In January, Russia’s defense ministry announced that four S-400 air defense systems would be deployed to the Western Military District in 2017.⁸¹ In January 2016, Commander in Chief of Russian Ground Forces General Oleg Salyukov announced that four new ground divisions would be formed in 2016, three of which would be based in the Western Military District, allegedly in response to “intensified exercises of NATO countries.”⁸² According to an assessment published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “The overall effect is to produce a line of substantial Russian combat forces along the western border, including opposite Belarus. By contrast with the ad hoc arrangements of the early stages of the conflict with Ukraine, these new forces are permanently established.”⁸³

WWTA: The WWTA states that Russian “strategic objectives in Ukraine—maintaining long-term influence over Kyiv and frustrating Ukraine’s attempts to integrate into Western institutions—will remain unchanged in 2017” and that Vladimir Putin “is likely to maintain pressure on Kyiv through multiple channels, including through Russia’s actions in eastern Ukraine, where Russia arms so-called ‘separatists.’” In addition, Moscow “seeks to undermine Ukraine’s fragile economic system and divided political situation to create opportunities to rebuild and consolidate Russian influence in Ukrainian decision making.” The

WWTA also states that “[s]ettlement talks over the breakaway region of Transnistria will continue, but any progress is likely to be limited to smaller issues.”⁸⁴

Summary: NATO members in Eastern and Central Europe view Russia as a threat, a fear that is not unfounded considering Russian aggression against Ukraine and Georgia. The threat of conventional attack against a NATO member by Russia remains low but cannot be ruled out entirely. Russia’s grasp and use of unconventional warfare against neighboring countries should remain a top issue for U.S. and NATO planners.

Militarization of the High North. The Arctic region is home to some of the roughest terrain and harshest weather found anywhere in the world. Increasingly, the melting of Arctic ice during the summer months is causing new challenges for the U.S. in terms of Arctic security. Many of the shipping lanes currently used in the Arctic are a considerable distance from search and rescue (SAR) facilities, and natural resource exploration that would be considered routine in other locations is complex, costly, and dangerous in the Arctic.

The U.S. is one of five littoral Arctic powers and one of only eight countries with territory located above the Arctic Circle, the area just north of 66 degrees north latitude that includes portions of Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, Canada, Greenland, Iceland, and the United States.

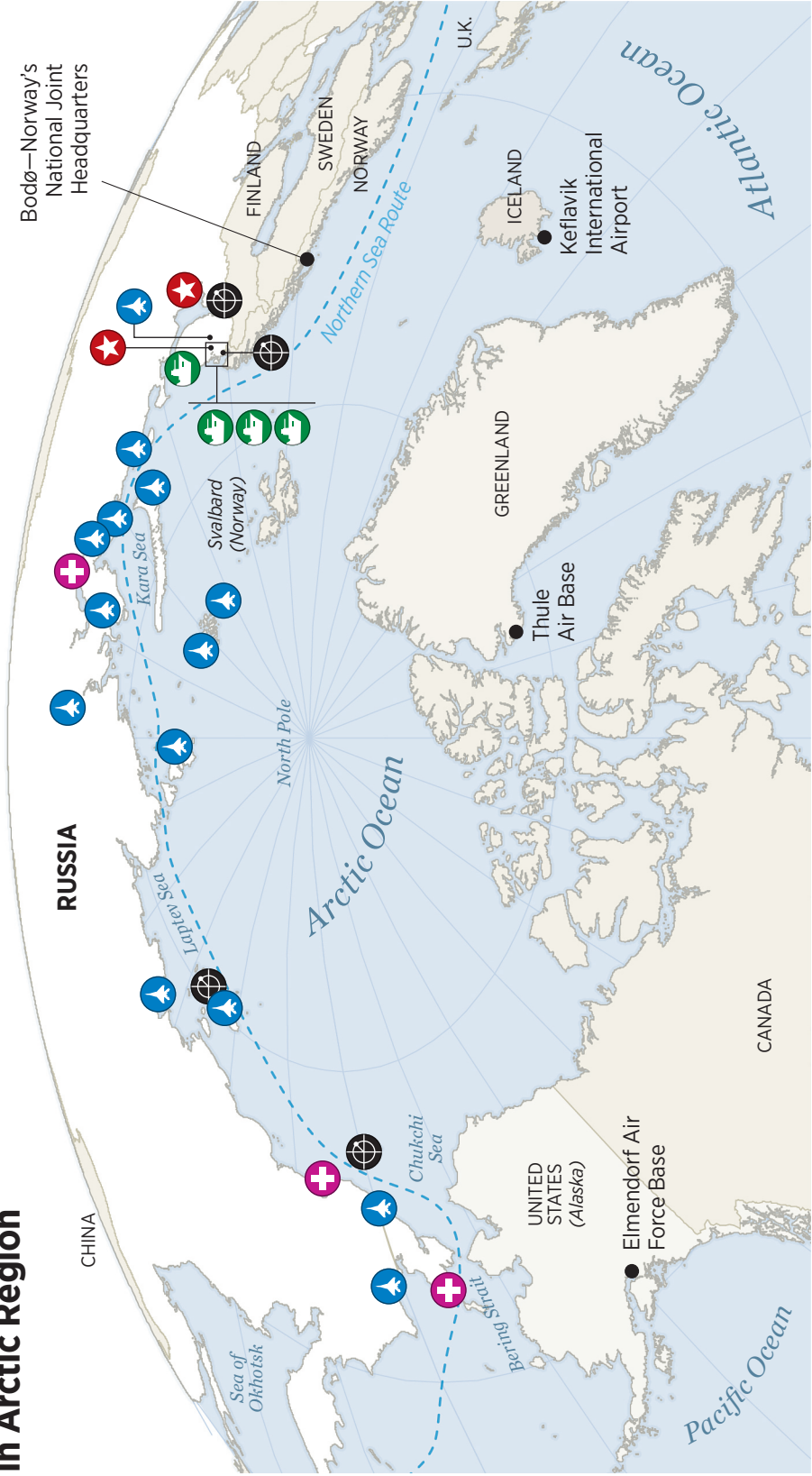
Arctic actors take different approaches to military activity in the region. Although the security challenges currently faced in the Arctic are not yet military in nature, there is still a requirement for military capability in the region that can support civilian authorities. For example, civilian SAR and response to natural disasters in such an unforgiving environment can be augmented by the military.

Russia has taken steps to militarize its presence in the region. In March, a decree signed by Russian President Putin gave the Federal Security Service (FSB) additional powers to confiscate land “in areas with special objects for land use, and in the border areas.”⁸⁵ Russia’s

MAP 5

Russia Maintains Strong Base Presence in Arctic Region

- ★ Headquarters
- ✈ Naval bases
- ✈ Air bases
- 🎯 Joint bases
- ⛑ Rescue centers*



* Rescue centers have potential for dual-purpose use as military installations.
SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

Arctic territory is included within this FSB-controlled border zone. In a parade on May 9, 2017, Russia showcased its Pantsir-SA SAM system, which is designed to operate in the Arctic. The system began firing trials in June.⁸⁶ In addition, the Arctic-based Northern Fleet accounts for two-thirds of the Russian Navy. A new Arctic command was established in 2015 to coordinate all Russian military activities in the Arctic region.⁸⁷ Two Arctic brigades have been formed, and Russia is planning to form Arctic Coastal Defense divisions,⁸⁸ which will be under the command of the Northern Fleet and stationed in the Kola Peninsula and in Russia's eastern Arctic.⁸⁹

Russia is also investing in Arctic bases. Its base on Alexandra Land, which will be commissioned in 2017,⁹⁰ can house 150 soldiers autonomously for up to 18 months.⁹¹ In addition, old Soviet-era facilities have been reopened. The airfield on Kotelný Island, for example, has been put into use for the first time in almost 30 years.⁹² The base will house 250 people and will have air defense missiles.⁹³

In fact, air power in the Arctic is increasingly important to Russia, which has 14 operational airfields in the Arctic along with 16 deep-water ports.⁹⁴ The 45th Air Force and Air Defense Army of the Northern Fleet was formed in December 2015, and Russia reportedly has placed radar and S-300 missiles on the Arctic bases at Franz Joseph Land, New Siberian Islands, Novaya Zemlya, and Severnaya Zemlya.⁹⁵

Russia's ultimate goal is to have a combined Russian armed force deployed in the Arctic by 2020, and it appears that Moscow is on track to accomplish this.⁹⁶ Russia is developing equipment optimized for Arctic conditions like the Mi-38 helicopter⁹⁷ and three new nuclear icebreakers to add to the 40 icebreakers already in service (six of which are nuclear).⁹⁸ Admiral Paul F. Zukunft, Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, has expressed concern that "Russia probably is going to launch two icebreaking corvettes with cruise missiles on them over the course of the next several years."⁹⁹ Russia's Northern Fleet is also building newly refitted

submarines including "a newly converted Belgorod nuclear submarine in 2018 to carry out "special missions."¹⁰⁰ Construction on the vessel had been suspended in 2000 when the *Kursk*, its sister submarine, sank. According to Russian media reports, the submarine "will be engaged in studying the bottom of the Russian Arctic shelf, searching for minerals at great depths, and also laying underwater communications."¹⁰¹ In May, Russia announced that its buildup of the Northern Fleet's nuclear capacity is intended "to phase 'NATO out of [the] Arctic.'"¹⁰²

Russia's Maritime Doctrine of Russian Federation 2020, adopted in July 2015, lists the Arctic as one of two focal points along with the Atlantic, a point emphasized by Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin.¹⁰³ In April 2016, a Russian Severodvinsk submarine participated in Arctic exercises that involved 20 vessels and fired a Kalibr cruise missile that reportedly hit a target on land.¹⁰⁴

Also in April 2016, Russian and Chechen paratroopers took part in separate military exercises in the Arctic. It was not the first time that these exercises had taken place. In 2014, 90 paratroopers landed on Barneo ice camp in the Arctic; in 2015, 100 paratroopers from Russia, Belarus, and Tajikistan took part in exercises on Barneo.¹⁰⁵ In advance of the April 2016 exercises, personnel and equipment were transferred through Longyearbyen airport on Svalbard, over which Norway has sovereignty. The use of the airport likely violated the Svalbard Treaty, which demilitarized the islands.¹⁰⁶

WWTa: The WWTa assesses that "as the Arctic becomes more open to shipping and commercial exploitation," the "risk of competition over access to sea routes and resources, including fish, will include countries traditionally active in the Arctic as well as other countries that do not border on the region but increasingly look to advance their economic interests there."¹⁰⁷

Summary: While NATO has been slow to turn its attention to the Arctic, Russia continues to develop and increase its military capabilities in the region. The likelihood of armed

conflict remains low, but physical changes in the region mean that the posture of players in the Arctic will continue to evolve. It is clear that Russia intends to exert a dominant influence. In the words of EUCOM's 2017 posture statement, "Russia is reasserting its military prowess and positioning itself for strategic advantage in the Arctic."¹⁰⁸

Threat from Russian Propaganda. Russia has consistently used propaganda to garner support for its foreign policies. The 2016 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation makes clear the Russian government's aims in using mass media to further its foreign policy objectives:

Russia seeks to ensure that the world has an objective image of the country, develops its own effective ways to influence foreign audiences, promotes Russian and Russian-language media in the global information space, providing them with necessary government support, is proactive in international information cooperation, and takes necessary steps to counter threats to its information security. New information and communication technology is used to this end.¹⁰⁹

Russian media are hardly independent. Russia ranked 148th out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' *2017 World Press Freedom Index*, the same as its ranking in the 2016 edition.¹¹⁰ Specifically:

What with draconian laws and website blocking, the pressure on independent media has grown steadily since Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012. Leading independent news outlets have either been brought under control or throttled out of existence. As TV channels continue to inundate viewers with propaganda, the climate has become increasingly oppressive for those who try to maintain quality journalism or question the new patriotic and neo-conservative. More and more bloggers are receiving prison sentences for their activity on online social networks. The leading human rights NGOs have been declared "foreign agents." The oppressive climate at the national level encourages powerful provincial officials far from Moscow to crack down even harder on their media critics.¹¹¹

Much of Moscow's propaganda is meant for domestic Russian audiences, who still rely widely on television for their news. Russia's leaders are reportedly looking to overhaul TV to improve its ability to attract young audiences who have been turning increasingly to social media and online news for information.¹¹² Widespread demonstrations against corruption in March were striking not only because they occurred in over 100 cities and towns across Russia, but also because they were heavily attended by young Russians, who are not as affected by TV-based propaganda.¹¹³

In addition to retaining power internally, Russia's leaders are working actively to influence audiences abroad. In 2016, Russia allocated \$900 million toward propaganda efforts.¹¹⁴ Russian propaganda TV network RT received around \$310 million in state funding in 2016.¹¹⁵ While its overall budget is expected to stay the same in 2017, RT will receive an extra \$19 million to start a French-language TV channel to complement an existing French-language website.¹¹⁶

In EUCOM's 2016 posture statement, General Breedlove described how Russian propaganda works: "Russia overwhelms the information space with a barrage of lies that must be addressed by the United States more aggressively in both public and private sectors to effectively expose the false narratives pushed daily by Russian-owned media outlets and their proxies."¹¹⁷ British Defence Secretary Michael Fallon sees Russia as "a country that in weaponizing misinformation has created what we might now see as the post-truth age."¹¹⁸

In Ukraine, examples abound. For instance, Russian media have promoted the false claims that Russia is simply defending ethnic Russians in Ukraine from far-right thugs, that the government in Kyiv is to blame for the violence that has enveloped parts of the country, and that the U.S. has instigated unrest in Ukraine.¹¹⁹ In 2014, after a civilian airliner was shot down by Russian-backed separatists, Russian propaganda put out stories alleging that the plane was shot down by the Ukrainian government.¹²⁰

Nor are Russian propaganda efforts limited only to TV channels. There are widespread reports that the Russian government has paid people to post comments to Internet articles that parrot the government's propaganda.¹²¹ People working in so-called troll factories with English-language skills are reportedly paid more.¹²² Twitter has been used in Ukraine to disseminate false or exaggerated Russian government claims. The 2017 EUCOM posture statement includes several instructive examples of Russian propaganda efforts:

Examples include Russia's outright denial of involvement in the lead up to Russia's occupation and attempted annexation in Crimea; attempts to influence elections in the United States, France and elsewhere; its aggressive propaganda campaigns targeting ethnic Russian populations among its neighbors; and cyber activities directed against infrastructure in the Baltic nations and Ukraine.¹²³

Russian propaganda poses its greatest threat to NATO allies that have a significant ethnic Russian population: the Baltic States, especially Estonia and Latvia. Many ethnic Russians in these countries get their news through Russian-language media (especially TV channels) that parrot the official Russian state line, often interspersed with entertainment shows, making it more appealing to viewers. In 2014, Lithuania and Latvia temporarily banned certain Russian TV stations such as RTR Rossiya in light of Russian aggression in Ukraine,¹²⁴ and in March 2016, Latvia banned the Russian "news agency" and propaganda website Sputnik from operating in the country.¹²⁵ Lithuanian Defense Minister Raimundas Karoblis stated in April 2017 that he believed Russian disinformation, especially propaganda stating that the capital city of Vilnius never belonged to Lithuania, are meant to lay the groundwork for future "kinetic operations."¹²⁶

The inability to reach ethnic Russians in their vernacular remains a glaring vulnerability for planners when thinking about Baltic security. In an effort to provide an independent, alternative Russian-language media outlet,

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are in various stages of planning and creating their own Russian-language programming to counter Russian propaganda efforts.¹²⁷ In September 2015, Estonia launched ETV+, a Russian-language TV channel.¹²⁸ Lithuania announced a temporary ban on the Russian state TV channel RTR Planeta in November 2016 and has limited the amount of Russian-language TV in the country.¹²⁹ Latvia has imposed similar temporary bans, including on Russian channel Rossiya RTR in April 2016, and has sought to help journalists counter Russian propaganda through workshops.¹³⁰

Outside of the Baltics, in May 2016, Ukraine announced a long-term ban on a number of Russian TV channels, websites, and Russian media personnel.¹³¹ The U.S., albeit belatedly, has also begun efforts to produce Russian-language programming. Current Time, a Russian-language network that is the result of collaboration between the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, began broadcasting in February 2017. Its 24-hour broadcasts are "an eclectic mix of documentaries, human interest programming and traditional news shows."¹³²

As General Scaparrotti testified in March, Russian propaganda and disinformation should be viewed as an extension of Russia's military capabilities: "The Russians see this as part of that spectrum of warfare, it's their asymmetric approach."¹³³ Russia has also sought to use misinformation to undermine NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltics. In April, Russian hackers planted a false story about U.S. troops being poisoned by mustard gas in Latvia on the Baltic News Service's website.¹³⁴ Similarly, Lithuanian parliamentarians and media outlets began receiving e-mails in February containing a false story that German soldiers had sexually assaulted an underage Lithuanian girl.¹³⁵ U.S. troops stationed in Poland for NATO's EFP have been the target of similar Russian misinformation campaigns.¹³⁶

WWTA: The WWTA states that "Russia is likely to sustain or increase its propaganda

campaigns.”¹³⁷ It also makes clear the link between cyber operations and information operations: “Information from cyber espionage can be leaked indiscriminately or selectively to shape perceptions. Furthermore, even a technically secure Internet can serve as a platform for the delivery of manipulative content crafted by foes seeking to gain influence or foment distrust.”¹³⁸

Summary: Russia has used propaganda consistently and aggressively to advance its foreign policy aims. This is likely to remain an essential element of Russian aggression and planning. The potential for its use to stir up agitation in the Baltic States, to undermine NATO, and to expose fissures between Western states makes Russian propaganda a continued threat to regional stability and a possible threat to the NATO alliance.

Russian Destabilization in the South Caucasus. The South Caucasus sits at a crucial geographical and cultural crossroads and has proven to be strategically important, both militarily and economically, for centuries. Although the countries in the region (Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan) are not part of NATO and therefore do not receive a security guarantee from the United States, they have participated to varying degrees in NATO and U.S.-led operations. This is especially true of Georgia, which aspires to join NATO.

Russia views the South Caucasus as part of its natural sphere of influence and stands ready to exert its influence in the region by force if necessary. In August 2008, Russia invaded Georgia, coming as close as 15 miles to the capital city of Tbilisi. Seven years later, several thousand Russian troops occupied the two Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

In 2015, Russia signed so-called integration treaties with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Among other things, these treaties call for a coordinated foreign policy, creation of a common security and defense space, and implementation of a streamlined process for Abkhazians and South Ossetians to receive Russian citizenship.¹³⁹ The Georgian Foreign Ministry

criticized the treaties as a step toward “annexation of Georgia’s occupied territories,”¹⁴⁰ both of which are still internationally recognized as part of Georgia. In March 2017, Putin approved an agreement with South Ossetia to incorporate “some military units” into the Russian Army, a development that Georgian authorities denounced as “yet another Russian provocation aimed at destabilizing the region.”¹⁴¹ In January, Russia announced tank drills in Abkhazia with over 2,000 troops, armored personnel carriers, and Russian T-72B3 tanks.¹⁴² Russia has based 7,000 soldiers in Abkhazia and South Ossetia¹⁴³ and is regularly expanding its “creeping annexation” of Georgia.¹⁴⁴ In July 2015, Russian troops expanded the border of the occupied territories to include a piece of the Baku–Supsa pipeline, which carries oil from Azerbaijan to Supsa, Georgia, with a capacity of 100,000 barrels a day and is owned by British Petroleum.¹⁴⁵

Towns are split in two and families are separated as a result of Russia’s occupation and imposition of an internal border. In 2016 alone, 134 people were detained by Russian border guards for illegal crossings into South Ossetia.¹⁴⁶ In April 2017, South Ossetia held a referendum to change its name to the “Republic of South Ossetia-Alania.” The referendum, along with elections in Abkhazia in March and South Ossetia in April, was widely unrecognized including by the U.S., Georgia, and NATO.¹⁴⁷

Today, Moscow continues to exploit ethnic divisions and tensions in the South Caucasus to advance pro-Russian policies that are often at odds with America’s or NATO’s goals in the region, but Russia’s influence is not restricted to soft power. In the South Caucasus, the coin of the realm is military might. It is a rough neighborhood surrounded by instability and insecurity reflected in terrorism, religious fanaticism, centuries-old sectarian divides, and competition for natural resources.

Russia maintains a sizable military presence in Armenia based on an agreement giving Moscow access to bases in that country for 49 years.¹⁴⁸ The bulk of Russia’s forces, consisting of approximately 5,000 soldiers, dozens of

fighter planes and attack helicopters, and approximately 100 T-72 tanks, as well as S-300 and Buk M01 air defense systems, are based around the 102nd Military Base.¹⁴⁹ In 2015, Russia and Armenia signed a Combined Regional Air Defense System agreement. This past year, Armenia acquired Russian Iskander missiles, although there is “a lack of consensus among defense experts on who really controls these Armenian Iskander missiles—Moscow or Yerevan.”¹⁵⁰ In addition to a joint air defense zone, Russia and Armenia signed a joint forces agreement in December 2016. Under this agreement, the initial term of which is five years, leadership of the combined force transfers to Russia’s Southern Military District Commander during periods of hostility.¹⁵¹

Another source of regional instability is the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict, which began in 1988 when Armenia made territorial claims to Azerbaijan’s Nagorno–Karabakh Autonomous Oblast.¹⁵² By 1992, Armenian forces and Armenian-backed militias occupied 20 percent of Azerbaijan, including the Nagorno–Karabakh region and seven surrounding districts. A cease-fire agreement was signed in 1994, and the conflict has been described as frozen since then. Since August 2014, violence has increased noticeably along the Line of Contact between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces. Intense fighting in April 2016 left 200 dead.¹⁵³ In addition, Azerbaijani forces recaptured some of the territory lost to Armenia in the early 1990s, the first changes in the Line of Contact since 1994.¹⁵⁴ Recently, tensions have simmered, and smaller-scale fighting has continued to prove deadly. In June 2017, the International Crisis Group reported that “[a] year after Nagorno–Karabakh’s April 2016 violent flare-up, Armenia and Azerbaijan are closer to war than at any point since the 1994 ceasefire.”¹⁵⁵

This conflict offers another opportunity for Russia to exert malign influence and consolidate power in the region. While its sympathies lie with Armenia, Russia is the largest supplier of weapons to both Armenia and Azerbaijan.¹⁵⁶ As noted by the late Dr. Alexandros Petersen, a highly respected expert on Eurasian security, it

is no secret “that the Nagorno–Karabakh dispute is a Russian proxy conflict, maintained in simmering stasis by Russian arms sales to both sides so that Moscow can sustain leverage over Armenia, Azerbaijan and by its geographic proximity Georgia.”¹⁵⁷

Following the outbreak of fighting, Russia expanded its influence in the region by brokering a shaky cease-fire that has largely held. By the time the OSCE Minsk Group, created in 1995 to find a peaceful solution to the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict, met, the Russian-brokered cease-fire was already in place.¹⁵⁸

The South Caucasus might seem distant to many American policymakers, but the spillover effect of ongoing conflict in the region can have a direct impact on both U.S. interests and the security of America’s partners, as well as on Turkey and other countries that are dependent on oil and gas transiting the region.

WWTA: The WWTA predicts that the “potential for large-scale hostilities [in the Nagorno–Karabakh region] will remain in 2017” and that the Georgian government will continue on the path of Euro-Atlantic integration.¹⁵⁹

Summary: Russia views the South Caucasus as a vital theater and uses a multitude of tools that include military aggression, economic pressure, and the stoking of ethnic tensions to exert influence and control, usually to promote outcomes that are at odds with U.S. interests.

Russia’s Actions in Syria. Although Russia has had a military presence in Syria for decades, in September 2015, it became the decisive actor in Syria’s ongoing civil war, having saved Bashar al-Assad from being overthrown and having strengthened his hand militarily, thus enabling government forces to retake territory lost during the war. In January 2017, Russia signed an agreement with the Assad regime to expand the naval facility at Tartus (Russia’s only naval base on the Mediterranean) “under a 49-year lease that could automatically renew for a further 25 years.” The planned expansion reportedly would “provide simultaneous berthing for up to 11 warships, including nuclear-powered vessels, more than doubling its present known capacity.”¹⁶⁰

The agreement also includes upgrades to the Hmeymim air base at Latakia, including repairs to a second runway.¹⁶¹ Russia deployed the S-400 anti-aircraft missile system to Hmeymim in late 2015.¹⁶²

Russia's actions in Syria provide a useful propaganda tool. In May 2016, for example, one hundred journalists toured Palmyra, a city that Russia had helped Assad's forces retake with air strikes and Special Forces troops.¹⁶³ In addition, Russia is using Syria as a testing ground for new weapons systems while obtaining valuable combat experience for its troops. According to Lieutenant General Ben Hodges, Commander, U.S. Army Europe, Russia has used its intervention in Syria as a "live-fire training opportunity."¹⁶⁴ In February 2017, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed that Russia had tested 162 weapons systems in Syria.¹⁶⁵ Despite this display of Russian arms in Syria, however, Russian weapons exports have remained flat, in part because India and China are developing more weapons systems domestically.¹⁶⁶ In 2016, Russian arms exports rose slightly to \$15 billion, up from \$14.5 billion in 2015 but still lower than \$15.7 billion in 2013.¹⁶⁷

Russia's activities in Syria have allowed Assad to stay in power and have made achievement of a peaceful political settlement with rebel groups nearly impossible. They also have undermined American policy in the Middle East, including by frequently targeting forces backed by the U.S. As summarized in EUCOM's 2017 posture statement:

Russia's military intervention has changed the dynamics of the conflict, bolstered the Bashar al-Assad regime, targeted moderate opposition elements, and compounded human suffering in Syria, and complicated U.S. and coalition operations against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Russia has used this chaos to establish a permanent presence in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean.¹⁶⁸

The Putin regime will likely seek to link cooperation in Syria with a softening of U.S. policy in Europe, especially with regard to economic sanctions.

Russian pilots have occasionally acted dangerously in the skies over Syria. In one incident in May 2017, a Russian fighter jet intercepted a U.S. KC-10 tanker, performing a barrel roll over the top of the KC-10.¹⁶⁹ That same month, Russia stated that U.S. and allied aircraft would be banned from flying over large areas of Syria because of a deal agreed to by Russia, Iran, and Turkey. The U.S. responded that the deal does not "preclude anyone from going after terrorists wherever they may be in Syria."¹⁷⁰ The U.S. and Russia have a deconfliction hotline to avoid mid-air collisions and incidents. In April, Russia threatened to cut the line following U.S. cruise missile strikes against a Syrian airbase.¹⁷¹ In May, Lieutenant General Jeffrey Harrigian, Commander of U.S. Air Forces Central Command, reported increased use of the line as a result of stepped up operations near Raqqa.¹⁷²

WWTa: The WWTa concludes that "Moscow's deployment of combat assets to Syria in late 2015 helped change the momentum of the conflict."¹⁷³ It further concludes that "Russia will continue to look to leverage its military support to the Asad regime to drive a political settlement process in Syria on its terms"; that "Moscow has demonstrated that it can sustain a modest force at a high-operations tempo in a permissive, expeditionary setting while minimizing Russian casualties and economic costs"; and that "Moscow is also likely to use Russia's military intervention in Syria, in conjunction with efforts to capitalize on fears of a growing ISIS and extremist threat, to expand its role in the Middle East."¹⁷⁴

Summary: While not an existential threat to the U.S., Russia's intervention in Syria ensures that any future settlement will be run through Moscow and will include terms consistent with Russian strategic interests. Russia's intervention in Syria has helped to keep Assad in power, has further entrenched Russia's military position in the region, and has greatly degraded the impact of U.S. policy in Syria, often seeking to counteract U.S. actions and targeting U.S.-backed forces on the ground.

The Balkans. Security has improved dramatically in the Balkans since the 1990s, but violence

based on religious and ethnic differences remains an ongoing possibility. These tensions are exacerbated by sluggish economies, high unemployment, and political corruption. According to the 2017 EUCOM posture statement, “[t]he Balkans’ stability since the late 90’s masks political and socio-economic fragility,” and Russia’s influence in the region has led to further destabilization: “In the Balkans, Russia exploits ethnic tensions to slow progress on European and transatlantic integration. In 2016, Russia overtly interfered in the political processes of both Bosnia–Herzegovina and Montenegro.”¹⁷⁵

Senior members of the Russian government have cited NATO enlargement in the Balkans as one of the biggest threats to Russia.¹⁷⁶ In June 2017, Montenegro became NATO’s 29th member state, joining Albania and Croatia as NATO member states in the Balkans. Russia stands accused of being behind a failed plot to break into Montenegro’s parliament on election day in 2016, assassinate its former prime minister, and install a pro-Russian government. Russia has denied involvement in the plot, but Montenegro’s chief prosecutor has named two Russian citizens as the alleged organizers and has characterized the plot as the work of “nationalists from Russia.”¹⁷⁷

After Russia annexed Crimea, the Montenegrin government backed European sanctions against Moscow and even implemented its own sanctions. Nevertheless, Russia has significant economic influence in Montenegro and in 2015 sought unsuccessfully to gain access to Montenegrin ports for the Russian navy to refuel and perform maintenance.

Serbia in particular has long served as Russia’s foothold in the Balkans. Both Russia and Serbia are Orthodox countries, and Russia wields huge political influence in Serbia. Moscow backed Serbian opposition to Kosovo’s independence in 2008 and continues to use Kosovo’s independence to justify its own actions in Crimea, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia. Russian media are active in the country, broadcasting in Serbian.¹⁷⁸

Serbia and Russia have signed a strategic partnership agreement focused on economic

issues. Russia’s inward investment is focused on the transport and energy sectors. Except for those in the Commonwealth of Independent States, Serbia is the only country in Europe that has a free trade deal with Russia. It therefore seemed odd when Russia decided to scrap the South Stream gas pipeline, likely costing Serbia billions of euros of inward investment and thousands of local jobs. Even with the negative impact of the South Stream cancellation, however, Serbia will likely continue to consider Russia its closest ally.

Serbia’s current president is trying to walk a fine line, promising closer ties with Russia, after speaking out against sanctions imposed on Russia because of its actions in Ukraine,¹⁷⁹ while also promising to continue on the path to EU integration.¹⁸⁰ In October, the Russian ambassador to Serbia warned of damage to bilateral economic relations if Serbia were to join the EU.¹⁸¹ With 80 percent of its gas coming from Russia, Serbia remains dependent on Russian energy. In January, seeking to diversify its energy supply, Serbia signed a memorandum of understanding with Bulgaria to develop an energy link between the two nations.¹⁸²

The Russian–Serbian military relationship is similarly close. Russia signed an agreement with Serbia to allow Russian soldiers to be based at Niš airport, which Serbia has used to meddle in northern Kosovo.¹⁸³ Serbia has observer status in the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Russia’s answer to NATO, and has signed a 15-year military cooperation agreement with Russia that includes the sharing of intelligence, military officer exchanges, and joint military exercises. The situation in Ukraine has not changed Serbian attitudes regarding military cooperation with Russia. During a state visit in October 2014, Putin was honored with the largest Serbian military parade since the days of Yugoslavia.¹⁸⁴ The two countries have also carried out military training exercises, and Serbia has inquired about obtaining Russia’s S-300 surface-to-air missile system.¹⁸⁵ Following a May 2017 visit to Russia, Serbian Defense Minister Zoran Djordjevic stated that Russia had agreed to deliver

six MiG-29s, 30 T-72 tanks, and 30 BRDM-2 armored vehicles to Serbia.¹⁸⁶

In November 2016, Serbia hosted a joint exercise named Slavic Brotherhood with Belarus and Russia that consisted of 700 troops. However, Serbia still exercises far more without Russia than with Russia: “In 2016, out of 26 training exercises only two are with Russia. Out of 21 multinational training drills in 2015, the Serbian military participated in only two with Russia.”¹⁸⁷ Like Russia, Serbia is a member of NATO’s Partnership for Peace program. Additionally, Serbia has been part of the U.S. National Guard’s State Partnership Program, partnering with the State of Ohio since 2006.

Russia is also active in Bosnia and Herzegovina—specifically, the ethnically Serb Republika Srpska, one of two substate entities inside Bosnia and Herzegovina that emerged from that country’s civil war in the 1990s.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is on the path to joining the transatlantic community but has a long way to go. It negotiated a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU, but the agreement is not in force because key economic and political reforms have not been implemented. In 2010, NATO offered Bosnia and Herzegovina a Membership Action Plan, but progress on full membership has been stalled because immovable defense properties are still not controlled by the Ministry of Defense. Moscow knows that exploiting internal ethnic and religious divisions among the Serb, Bosniak, and Croat populations is the easiest way to prevent Bosnia and Herzegovina from entering the transatlantic community.

Republika Srpska’s leader, Milorad Dodik, has long advocated independence for the region and has enjoyed a very close relationship with the Kremlin. Recent events in Ukraine, especially the annexation of Crimea, have inspired more separatist rhetoric in Republika Srpska. In many ways, Russia’s relationship with Republika Srpska is akin to its relationship with Georgia’s South Ossetia and Abkhazia autonomous regions: more like a relationship with another sovereign state than a relationship with a semiautonomous region inside Bosnia

and Herzegovina. When Putin visited Serbia in October 2014, Dodik was treated like a head of state and invited to Belgrade to meet with him. More recently, in September 2016, Dodik was treated as a head of state on a visit to Moscow just days before a referendum that chose January 9 as Republika Srpska’s “statehood day,” a date filled with religious and ethnic symbolism for the Serbs.¹⁸⁸ Republika Srpska hosted its “statehood day” in defiance of a ruling by Bosnia’s federal constitutional court that both the celebration and the referendum establishing it were illegal.¹⁸⁹ The U.S. sanctioned Dodik in January 2017, saying that “by obstructing the Dayton accords, Milorad Dodik poses a significant threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia–Herzegovina.”¹⁹⁰ Dodik has further promised to hold a referendum on independence by the end of 2018.¹⁹¹

Russia has also cast doubt on the future of the European-led peacekeeping operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in January that “We have reminded our Western partners multiple times that it’s getting indecent to retain in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is considered to be an independent state, the so-called Office of the High representative” that was created by the Dayton accords.¹⁹² Russia, which holds veto power in the U.N. Security Council, abstained in November 2015 during the annual vote on extending the peacekeeping mission.¹⁹³ This was the first time in 14 years that it failed to vote for this resolution. When a U.N. resolution extending the mandate of the EUFOR ALTHEA mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina was adopted unanimously in 2016, Russia’s U.N. representative condemned alleged “anti-Serbian bias” and again urged that international monitors be removed from the country.¹⁹⁴

The situation with Kosovo remains fragile, but an EU-led rapprochement between Kosovo and Serbia has shown signs of modest success. In January, a train traveling from Belgrade to Mitrovica, a heavily Serb town in Kosovo, was stopped at the Kosovar border. The Russian-made train was “painted in the colors of the Serbian flag and feature[d] pictures of

churches, monasteries, and medieval towns, as well as the words ‘Kosovo is Serbian’ in 21 languages.”¹⁹⁵ The incident raised tensions in the region significantly.

Macedonia has made great progress toward joining NATO but has been blocked by Greece because of a name dispute. Macedonia faced six months of unrest and massive protests after elections in December produced a hung Parliament. Tensions remain high. A coalition government took office in May. It includes two ethnic Albanian parties that are seeking concessions, including that Albanian be made a second language, as a condition of their continued support.¹⁹⁶

Another challenge for the region is the increasing presence of the Islamic State and the rise of extremism. Thankfully, the region has not suffered a major attack from ISIS, but it has served as a fertile recruiting ground for the Islamic State. Several hundred fighters from the Balkans are in Iraq and Syria.¹⁹⁷ Most of these foreign fighters, who have formed a so-called Balkans Battalion for Islamic State, have come from Kosovo, but others can be traced back to Albania, Bosnia, and the Republic of Macedonia.

The closing of the Balkan route for migrants means that Islamist transit through the region no longer poses the threat that it once did. Some of the terrorists who perpetrated attacks in Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in 2016 are known to have transited through the Balkan Peninsula. However, the region remains fertile ground for Islamist ideology,¹⁹⁸ which is spread in part by Salafists operating in the region who are backed by countries like Saudi Arabia.¹⁹⁹

The U.S. has invested heavily in the Balkans since the end of the Cold War. Tens of thousands of U.S. servicemembers have served in the Balkans, and the U.S. has spent billions of dollars in aid there, all in the hope of creating a secure and prosperous region that will someday be part of the transatlantic community.

WWTA: The WWTA notes that the tightening of border controls in the Balkans has led to a limitation of migration to Europe.²⁰⁰

Summary: The Balkans are being squeezed from three sides: by increased Russian involvement in internal affairs, ISIS using the region as a transit and recruiting ground, and continued economic sluggishness and unemployment. The region faced greater turmoil over the past year than it has for some time. Russia continues to inflame historic religious and ethnic tensions to maximize its influence and destabilize the region.

Threats to the Commons

Other than cyberspace and (to some extent) airspace, the commons are relatively secure in the European region. Despite periodic Russian aggressive maneuvers near U.S. and NATO vessels, this remains largely true with respect to the security of and free passage through shipping lanes in the region. The maritime domain is heavily patrolled by the navies and coast guards of NATO and NATO partner countries; except in remote areas in the Arctic Sea, search and rescue capabilities are readily available; maritime-launched terrorism is not a significant problem; and piracy is virtually nonexistent in the European region.

Sea. In May 2017, three Russian corvettes sailed four nautical miles off the Latvian coast within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of Latvia; in April, a *Kilo*-class Russian submarine was detected near Latvian sea space.²⁰¹ Altogether, 209 Russian aircraft or naval vessels were detected near Latvian air or sea space in 2016.²⁰² Also in May, two Russian Su-24 fighters flew within 200 meters of a Dutch frigate, the HNLMS *Evertsen*.²⁰³ On February 10, the USS *Porter*, a destroyer operating in international waters in the Black Sea, was buzzed by two Russian Su-24 fighters, followed by a solo Su-24 and finally by a Russian IL-38. The aircraft were flying with their transponders switched off and did not respond to radio requests to stop. A spokesperson for EUCOM said that such buzzing incidents are “always concerning because they could result in miscalculation or accident.”²⁰⁴

Moreover, Russian aggressive actions in the sea-lanes extend beyond European waters. In

April, Russian surveillance ships followed the Carl Vinson Strike Group, which the U.S. had deployed near the Korean Peninsula in the Pacific.²⁰⁵

Russian threats to the maritime theater are not limited to surface vessels. In October 2015, news reports of Russian vessels operating aggressively near undersea communications cables raised concerns that Russia might be laying the groundwork for severing the cables in the event of a future conflict.²⁰⁶ According to Admiral Michelle Howard, Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Europe, “We’re seeing activity [by Russia] that we didn’t even see when it was the Soviet Union.”²⁰⁷

In July, Russia sailed its last remaining Typhoon-class nuclear submarine, the *Dmitry Donskoy*, from Severodvinsk across the entire length of Norway into the North Sea, past Denmark and Sweden, and into the Baltic Sea before sailing on to St. Petersburg. This was the first time a Typhoon-class submarine had sailed into the Baltic Sea. A Russian nuclear-powered cruiser armed with cruise missiles, surface-to-air missiles, torpedoes, and rocket launchers from the Northern Fleet joined the *Dmitry Donskoy* in St. Petersburg.²⁰⁸

Russian advances in submarine activity are likewise worrisome. Haga Lunde, the head of Norway’s Intelligence Service, stated in February that “[w]e are seeing an increase in Russian submarine activity; also that their vessels are moving further west. Meanwhile, the submarine’s technology has been so well developed that it is becoming increasingly difficult to detect them.”²⁰⁹

Closer to the United States, Russia’s naval vessels are being used for espionage. In March, a Russian spy ship was tracked 20 miles off the U.S. coast near the naval base at Kings Bay, Georgia. In February, the same vessel had sailed 30 miles off the coast of Connecticut, potentially near the U.S. submarine base at Groton.²¹⁰

Airspace. Russia has continued its provocative military flights near U.S. and European airspace over the past year. In October 2016, two Russian TU-160 Blackjack bombers flew

north of Norway, then northwest of Scotland, and on west of Ireland before flying into the Bay of Biscay off French and Spanish territory and then turning around and flying a similar route back to Russia. France, Norway, Spain, and the U.K. scrambled jets to intercept the bombers. Iceland’s foreign ministry stated that the bombers had flown between 6,000 and 9,000 feet under a commercial aircraft flying from Reykjavik, Iceland, to Stockholm, Sweden.²¹¹

Aggressive Russian flying has also occurred near U.S. airspace. Over the course of four days in April 2017, Russian aircraft flew near the Alaskan coast in four separate incidents. In the first incident, two F-22s and an E-3 AWAC intercepted two Russian Tu-95 bombers. The next day, two Tu-95 bombers were tracked by a U.S. AWACS while a Russian IL-38 flew into Alaska’s Air Defense Identification Zone and then left. In the third incident, two IL-38s identified by NORAD and a maritime patrol flew halfway up the Aleutian Islands. In the final incident, two Russian Tu-95s flew near Alaska and Canada before being intercepted by U.S. F-22s and Canadian CF-18s.²¹² Soon afterward, on May 3, U.S. F-22s intercepted two Russian Tu-95 bombers and Su-35 fighter escorts flying within 50 miles of Alaska. This was the first time since 2015 that Russian bombers had flown near the U.S. escorted by fighter jets.²¹³

Russian flights have also targeted U.S. ally Japan. In April, three Russian Tu-95 Bear Bombers and an IL-20 surveillance aircraft flew within 36 miles of the Japanese coast, and 14 Japanese fighters were scrambled to intercept them.²¹⁴ A similar incident occurred in January when three Russian Bear bombers, three refueling IL-78 aircraft, and two radar and communications A-50 AWACS flew near Japan. The bombers flew around Japan, and the incident caused NORAD to increase its threat posture from 5 to 4.²¹⁵

The main threat from Russian airspace incursions, however, remains near NATO territory in Eastern Europe, specifically the Black Sea and Baltic regions. In May 2017, a Russian

Su-27 flew within 20 feet of a U.S. P-8A plane flying in international airspace over the Black Sea.²¹⁶ In the Baltics, NATO aircraft intercepted Russian military aircraft 110 times in 2016, down from a high of 160 intercepts in 2015 but far above the 43 recorded in 2013; NATO officials believe the decrease in 2016 could be due to Russia's shifting resources to the Syrian theater.²¹⁷ In May 2017, a plane carrying Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, flying without a filed flight plan and without establishing radio contact, briefly violated Estonian airspace, very likely to send a political message.

That the provocative and hazardous behavior of the Russian armed forces or Russian-sponsored groups poses a threat to civilian aircraft in Europe was demonstrated by the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17, killing all 283 passengers and 15 crewmembers, over the skies of southeastern Ukraine. In addition, there have been several incidents involving Russian military aircraft flying in Europe without using their transponders. In February 2015, for example, civilian aircraft in Ireland had to be diverted or were prevented from taking off when Russian bombers flying with their transponders turned off flew across civilian air lanes.²¹⁸ Similarly, in March 2014, an Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) plane almost collided with a Russian signals intelligence (SIGINT) plane, the two coming within 90 meters of each other.²¹⁹ In a December 2014 incident, a Cimber Airlines flight from Copenhagen to Poznan nearly collided with a Russian intelligence plane that was flying with its transponder turned off.²²⁰

WWTA: The WWTA does not specifically mention threats to sea-lanes or airspace, but it does emphasize global displacement as an ongoing challenge: "Europe and other host countries will face accommodation and integration challenges in 2017, and refugees and economic migrants will probably continue to seek to transit to Europe."²²¹

Summary: Russia's violation of the sovereign airspace of NATO member states is a probing and antagonistic policy that is designed both to test the defense of the alliance and as practice for potential future conflicts.

Similarly, Russian antagonistic behavior in international waters is a threat to freedom of the seas. Russia's reckless aerial activity in the region remains a threat to civilian aircraft flying in European airspace.

Space. Admiral Cecil Haney, head of U.S. Strategic Command, said in March 2015 that "[t]he threat in space, I fundamentally believe, is a real one."²²² Russia's space capabilities are robust, but Moscow "has not recently demonstrated intent to direct malicious and destabilizing actions toward U.S. space assets."²²³ However, Admiral Haney testified in March 2015 that "Russian leaders openly maintain that they possess anti-satellite weapons and conduct anti-satellite research."²²⁴

In December 2016, Russia carried out the fifth test of its PL-19 Nudol anti-satellite missile. In March 2016, Air Force Lieutenant General David J. Buck, Commander, Joint Functional Component Command for Space, stated that "Russia views U.S. dependency on space as an exploitable vulnerability, and [the Russians] are taking deliberate actions to strengthen their counter-space capabilities."²²⁵ Air Force Lieutenant General John "Jay" Raymond, Commander, Air Force Space Command, has testified that Russia's anti-satellite capabilities have progressed to the extent that "we are quickly approaching the point where every satellite in every orbit can be threatened."²²⁶

WWTA: According to the WWTA, "Russian military strategists likely view counterspace weapons as an integral part of broader aerospace defense rearmament and are very likely pursuing a diverse suite of capabilities to affect satellites in all orbital regimes." In addition, "Russian lawmakers have promoted military pursuit of ASAT missiles to strike low-Earth orbiting satellites, and Russia is testing such a weapon for eventual deployment. A Russian official also acknowledged development of an aircraft-launched missile capable of destroying satellites in low-Earth orbit."²²⁷ The assessment notes Russia's interest in electronic warfare for use against U.S. space systems and states that Russia "intends to modernize its EW forces and field a new generation of EW

weapons by 2020.”²²⁸ Russia is also developing an airborne laser weapon and will “continue to conduct sophisticated on-orbit satellite activities, such as rendezvous and proximity operations, at least some of which are likely intended to test dual-use technologies with inherent counterspace functionality.”²²⁹

Summary: Despite some interruption of cooperation in space because of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, cooperation on the International Space Station and commercial transactions involving space-related technology have continued unabated. Russia also continues the aggressive building out of its counterspace capabilities.

Cyber. Russian cyber capabilities are incredibly advanced. Over the past year, Russia engaged in high-profile cyber aggression targeted at Europe and the United States. Russian cyber-attacks and intrusions were a critical element in a larger effort to undermine Americans’ confidence in their elections. A report released by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in January 2017, which took into account assessments by the Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and National Security Agency, stated that “Russia’s intelligence services conducted cyber operations against targets associated with the 2016 US presidential election, including targets associated with both major US political parties.”²³⁰ In addition, “We assess with high confidence that Russian military intelligence (General Staff Main Intelligence Directorate or GRU) used the Guccifer 2.0 persona and DCLeaks.com to release US victim data obtained in cyber operations publicly and in exclusives to media outlets and relayed material to WikiLeaks.”²³¹ The Russian cyber operations also “accessed elements of multiple state or local electoral boards,” but not systems involved in vote tallying.²³²

Russian hackers also targeted other democratic electoral or government systems, including in France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands, over the past year. Hans-Georg Maassen, President of Germany’s Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, a domestic

security agency, said that “large amounts of data” were stolen in cyber-attacks against the Bundestag in May 2015.²³³ The theft, reportedly involving 16 gigabytes, has been attributed to Russia.²³⁴ Germany’s Parliament and political parties, among them Chancellor Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union, have been targeted in subsequent cyber-attacks,²³⁵ including attempted attacks in January 2017.²³⁶ Over the course of four months in 2016, Italy’s foreign ministry was subjected to a Russian cyber-attack that involved non-encrypted communications.²³⁷

In March, the head of the Netherlands’ General Intelligence and Security Service, Rob Bertholee, stated that Russian hackers had tried to gain access to more than 100 Dutch government e-mail accounts. Russia is widely believed to be behind a May cyber-attack against then-candidate for the French presidency Emmanuel Macron. E-mails and documents stolen in the attacks were released along with a mix of fake documents.²³⁸ National Security Agency Director Admiral Mike Rogers testified in May that the U.S. warned French authorities about the cyber-attacks: “[W]e gave them a heads up: ‘Look, we are watching the Russians. We are seeing them penetrate some of your infrastructure. Here’s what we’ve seen.... [W]hat can we do to assist?’”²³⁹ Frequent cyber-attacks against French defense targets included 24,000 attacks in 2016, according to French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian.²⁴⁰

U.S. defense targets are also in the sights of Russian hackers, who reportedly sought to hack into the Twitter accounts of more than 10,000 people working at the Pentagon.²⁴¹ NATO is another frequent target, with Russian cyber-attacks up 60 percent in 2016 over the previous year.²⁴²

Nor do Russian cyber-attacks focus solely on government targets. In May 2017, Ukrainian authorities closed two Russian social media platforms, citing concerns that they were being used for cyber-attacks.²⁴³ A sophisticated Russian cyber-attack on Ukrainian power companies in December 2015 resulted in power outages that affected 225,000 Ukrainians

for several hours. The cyber-attack has been linked to a Russian-based hacking group.²⁴⁴ Subsequent investigations by Ukrainian and U.S. cyber officials found that it was “synchronized and coordinated, probably following extensive reconnaissance,” and that efforts were taken to “attempt to interfere with expected restoration efforts.”²⁴⁵ A year later, in December 2016, a new cyber-attack against Ukraine’s electricity grid left 100,000–200,000 people without power.²⁴⁶ In February, the former U.S. Deputy Secretary of Energy stated that she believed Russia was behind the 2016 attack.²⁴⁷ The Ukrainian attacks represent an escalation, moving beyond crippling communications or mere infiltration of critical systems to taking down critical infrastructure with widespread physical effects.

In the Baltic theater, Russian hackers have launched multiple cyber-attacks against the energy infrastructure of the Baltic States, including two attacks against the electricity grid, as well as attacks targeting a gas distribution system.²⁴⁸ In early 2016, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency warned that Russian hackers using software from Russian-origin companies could gain access to industrial systems in the U.S., including electrical and water systems.²⁴⁹ Russia is also thought to be behind five days of cyber-attacks against Sweden’s Air Traffic Control system in November 2015, which led to flight delays and groundings.²⁵⁰ Swedish authorities reportedly believe that the attack was the work of Russian military intelligence, the GRU.²⁵¹

The Russian hacking group APT28 or Fancy Bear, believed to be linked to Russia’s GRU military intelligence, is believed to have hacked Denmark’s Defence Ministry across 2015 and 2016 and to have gained access to nonclassified information.²⁵² The group is also thought to be responsible for cyber-attacks against the Democratic National Committee in the United States and the French TV station TV5Monde, which was taken off the air following an April 2015 cyber-attack.²⁵³ General Yuri Baluyevsky, former chief of Russia’s General Staff, has characterized Russia’s use of cyber-attacks as

“much more important than victory in a classical military conflict, because it is bloodless, yet the impact is overwhelming and can paralyze all of the enemy state’s power structures.”²⁵⁴

Russia continues to use allied criminal organizations (so-called patriotic hackers) to help it engage in cyber aggression. Cyber-attacks against Estonia in 2007 and Georgia in 2008 and the December 2015 attack against Ukraine’s power grid were conducted by these “patriotic hackers” and likely coordinated or sponsored by Russian security forces.²⁵⁵ Using these hackers gives the Russians greater resources and can help to shield their true capabilities. Patriotic hackers also give the Russian government deniability. In June, for example, Putin stated that “[i]f they (hackers) are patriotically-minded, they start to make their own contribution to what they believe is the good fight against those who speak badly about Russia. Is that possible? Theoretically it is possible.”²⁵⁶

WWTA: The WWTA states that “Russia is a full-scope cyber actor that will remain a major threat to US Government, military, diplomatic, commercial, and critical infrastructure. Moscow has a highly advanced offensive cyber program, and in recent years, the Kremlin has assumed a more aggressive cyber posture.” This aggressive posture “was evident in Russia’s efforts to influence the 2016 US election, and we assess that only Russia’s senior-most officials could have authorized the 2016 US election-focused data thefts and disclosures, based on the scope and sensitivity of the targets.” Russian actors also “have conducted damaging and disruptive cyber attacks” outside the United States, “including on critical infrastructure networks,” and in some cases “have masqueraded as third parties, hiding behind false online personas designed to cause the victim to misattribute the source of the attack. Russia has also leveraged cyberspace to seek to influence public opinion across Europe and Eurasia.” The WWTA concludes “that Russian cyber operations will continue to target the United States and its allies to gather intelligence, support Russian decision

making, conduct influence operations to support Russian military and political objectives, and prepare the cyber environment for future contingencies.”²⁵⁷

Summary: Russia’s cyber capabilities are advanced and are a key tool in realizing the state’s strategic aims. Russia has used cyber-attacks to further the reach and effectiveness of its propaganda and disinformation campaigns, and its recent cyber-attacks against election processes in the U.S. and European countries have been designed to undermine citizens’ belief in the veracity of electoral outcomes and erode support for democratic institutions in the longer term. Russia also has used cyber-attacks to target physical infrastructure, including electrical grids, air traffic control, and gas distribution systems. Russia’s increasingly bold use of cyber capabilities, coupled with their sophistication and Moscow’s willingness to use them aggressively, presents a challenge for the U.S. and its interests abroad.

Conclusion

Overall, the threat to the U.S. homeland originating from Europe remains low, but the threat to American interests and allies in the region remains significant. Behind this threat lies Russia. Although Russia has the military capability to harm and (in the case of its nuclear arsenal) to pose an existential threat to the U.S., it has not conclusively demonstrated the intent to do so.

The situation is different when it comes to America’s allies in the region. Through NATO, the U.S. is obliged by treaty to come to the aid of the alliance’s European members. Russia continues to seek to undermine the NATO alliance and presents an existential threat to U.S. allies in Eastern Europe. NATO has been the cornerstone of European security and stability since its creation in 1949, and it is in America’s

interest to ensure that it maintains both the military capability and political will to fulfill its treaty obligations.

While Russia is not the threat to U.S. global interests that the Soviet Union was during the Cold War, it does pose challenges to a range of America’s interests and those of its allies and friends closest to Russia’s borders. Russia possesses a full range of capabilities from ground forces to air, naval, space, and cyber. It still maintains the world’s largest nuclear arsenal, and although a strike on the U.S. is highly unlikely, the latent potential for such a strike still gives these weapons enough strategic value vis-à-vis America’s NATO allies and interests in Europe to keep them relevant.

Russian provocations far below any scenario involving a nuclear exchange pose the most serious challenge to American interests, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, the Arctic, the Balkans, and the South Caucasus. It is with respect to these contingencies that Russia’s military capabilities are most relevant.

Threat Scores by Country

Russia. Russia seeks to maximize its strategic position in the world at the expense of the United States. It also seeks to undermine U.S. influence and moral standing, harasses U.S. and NATO forces, and is working to sabotage U.S. and Western policy in Syria. In addition, Russia has sought to increase its influence in the Western Balkans while maintaining robust information warfare and propaganda campaigns across Europe and even in the U.S. Moscow’s continued aggression and willingness to use every tool at its disposal in pursuit of its aims leads this *Index* to assess the overall threat from Russia as “aggressive” and “formidable.” This level is consistent with the threat assessment of Russia in the *2017 Index*.

Threats: Russia

	HOSTILE	AGGRESSIVE	TESTING	ASSERTIVE	BENIGN
Behavior		✓			

	FORMIDABLE	GATHERING	CAPABLE	ASPIRATIONAL	MARGINAL
Capability	✓				

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