

Russia

Russia remains an acute and formidable threat both to the United States and to U.S. interests in Europe. From the Arctic to the Baltics, Ukraine, and the South Caucasus, and increasingly in the Mediterranean, Russia continues to foment 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 uses its energy position in Europe along with espionage, cyberattacks, and information warfare to exploit vulnerabilities and seeks to drive wedges into the transatlantic alliance and undermine people's faith in government and societal institutions.

Overall, Russia has significant conventional and nuclear capabilities and remains the principal threat to European security. Its aggressive stance in a number of theaters, including the Balkans, Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine, continues both to encourage destabilization and to threaten U.S. interests.

Russian Military Capabilities. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), among the key weapons in Russia's inventory are 334 intercontinental ballistic missiles; 2,750 main battle tanks; and more than 5,140 armored infantry fighting vehicles, more than 6,100 armored personnel carriers, and more than 4,342 pieces of artillery. The navy has one aircraft carrier; 58 submarines (including 10 ballistic missile submarines); four cruisers; 16 destroyers; 14 frigates; and 105

patrol and coastal combatants. The air force has 1,223 combat-capable aircraft. The IISS counts 280,000 members of the army. Russia also has a total reserve force of 2,000,000 for all armed forces.¹ Russian deep-sea research vessels include converted ballistic missile submarines, which hold smaller auxiliary submarines that can operate on the ocean floor.²

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."³ In February 2018, for example, at Deir al-Zour in eastern Syria, 500 pro-Assad forces and Russian mercenaries armed with Russian tanks, artillery, and mortars attacked U.S.-supported Kurdish forces.⁴ Approximately 30 U.S. Rangers and Delta Force special operators were also at the base.⁵ U.S. airstrikes helped to repulse the attack, and according to some estimates, 300 Russian mercenaries were either killed or wounded.⁶

In January 2019, reports surfaced that 400 Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group were in Venezuela to bolster the regime of Nicolas Maduro.⁷ Russian propaganda in Venezuela has supported the regime and stoked fears of American imperialism. According to one report, "Kremlin-backed media in Latin America is pounding hard on the narrative that Washington's recognition of Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's legitimate president is part of

a centuries-old pattern of meddling by the United States in the region.”⁸ As the crisis metastasized and protests against the Maduro regime grew, Russia began to deploy Russian troops and supplies to bolster Maduro’s security forces.⁹ In December, Russia temporarily deployed two TU-160 nuclear-capable bombers to Caracas.¹⁰ Russia exports billions in arms to Venezuela (and has loaned the regime money to purchase Russian arms) along with \$70 million–\$80 million yearly in nonmilitary goods.¹¹

In July 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law creating a National Guard with a total strength (both civilian and military) of 340,000, controlled directly by him.¹² He created his National Guard, which is responsible for “enforcing emergency-situation regimes, combating terrorism, defending Russian territory, and protecting state facilities and assets,” by amalgamating “interior troops and various law-enforcement agencies.”¹³ Although Putin could issue a directive to deploy the force abroad,¹⁴ it is more likely to be used to stifle domestic dissent.

The World Bank projects that the Russian economy will grow by a tepid 1.4 percent in 2019.¹⁵ In the first quarter of 2019, real disposable incomes in Russia declined by 2.3 percent.¹⁶ Such low forecasts and economic results could imply that Russia will have difficulty funding military affairs, but economic problems at home also can incentivize regimes to pursue military adventures abroad to distract the public and generate positive news for the government. If an autocratic leader relies on military power to maintain political control, there is ample reason to maintain spending on the military in spite of glum economic news.

Russia spent \$61.4 billion on its military in 2018, which is 3.5 percent less than it spent in 2017.¹⁷ One analyst, however, cautions that:

In reality Russia’s effective military expenditure, based on purchasing power parity (Moscow buys from Russian defense manufacturers in rubles), is more in the range of \$150–180 billion per year, with a much higher percentage dedicated to

procurement, research and development than Western defense budgets.... There is well over 1 trillion rubles of military expenditure in Russia outside of the regular defense budget.¹⁸

Much of Russia’s military expenditures go toward modernization of its armed forces. In January 2018, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and U.S. Marine Corps General Joseph Dunford noted that “[t]here is not a single aspect of the Russian armed forces that has not received some degree of modernization over the past decade.”¹⁹ In 2019, according to the Russian Ministry of Defense, Russia will spend \$21.5 billion on procurement.²⁰ Taking into account total military expenditure, Russia spent 4 percent of GDP on defense in 2018.²¹

In early 2018, Russia introduced the new State Armament Program 2018–2027, a \$306 billion investment in new equipment and force modernization. However, according to the Royal Institute of International Affairs, “as inflation has eroded the value of the rouble since 2011, the new programme is less ambitious than its predecessor in real terms.”²²

Russia’s nuclear capabilities have been prioritized for modernization, and 82 percent of its nuclear forces have been modernized.²³ Russia plans to deploy the RS-28 (Satan 2) ICBM by 2021 as a replacement for the RS-36, which is being phased out in the 2020s.²⁴ The missile, which can carry up to 15 warheads, underwent flight development tests from April–June 2019.²⁵

The armed forces also continue to undergo process modernization, which was begun by Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov in 2008.²⁶ Partially because of this modernization, former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development Elbridge Colby stated in January 2018 that the U.S. military advantage over Russia is eroding.²⁷ Approximately 46 percent of Russian land forces’ equipment has been modernized.

Russia reportedly will begin state trials for its T-14 Armata main battle tank in 2019,²⁸ although the Armata’s cost might prove

prohibitive, and “procurement in quantity will focus on modernized T-72, T-80, and T-90 tanks.”²⁹ Russia’s fifth-generation Su-27 fighter fell short of expectations, particularly with regard to stealth capabilities. In May 2018, the government cancelled mass production of the Su-27 because of its high costs and limited capability advantages over upgraded fourth-generation fighters.³⁰

In October 2018, Russia’s sole aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, was severely damaged when a dry-dock sank and a crane fell, puncturing a hole in the deck and hull.³¹ The carrier is not likely to be salvaged. In May 2019, reports surfaced that Russia is seeking to build a new nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, beginning in 2023 for delivery in the late 2030s, but the procurement’s financial and technological feasibility remains questionable.³²

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.³³ Russia is also reportedly deploying Kalibr cruise missiles to submarines and surface vessels operating in the Western Atlantic.³⁴

Following years of delays, the *Admiral Gorshkov* stealth guided missile frigate was commissioned in July 2018. The second *Admiral Gorshkov*-class frigate, the *Admiral Kasatonov*, began sea trials in April 2019; however, according to some analysts, tight budgets and the inability to procure parts from Ukrainian industry (importantly, gas turbine engines) make it difficult for Russia to build the two additional *Admiral Gorshkov*-class frigates as planned.³⁵ On April 23, 2019, keel-laying ceremonies took place for the fifth and sixth *Admiral Gorshkov*-class frigates.³⁶ Russia plans to procure eight *Lider*-class guided missile destroyers for its Northern and Pacific Fleets, but procurement has faced consistent delay, and construction will not begin until 2025 at the earliest.³⁷

Russia recently sold three *Admiral Grigoryevich*-class frigates to India. The ships had been intended for the Black Sea Fleet, but Russia found itself unable to produce a replacement engine following Ukraine sanctions.

Similar problems have befallen the long-delayed *Admiral Gorshkov*-class procurements. Of the planned 14 frigates, Russia has engines for only two.³⁸

Russia’s naval modernization continues to prioritize submarines. According to the IISS, “Submarine building will focus on completing the series of *Borey-A* ballistic-missile boats armed with *Bulava* missiles and Project 08851 *Yasen-M* multi-role submarines, though from the early 2020s construction is expected to begin on the first *Khaski*-class successor.”³⁹ The *Khaski*-class submarines are planned fifth-generation stealth nuclear-powered submarines. They are slated to begin construction in 2023 and to be armed with Zircon hypersonic missiles, which have a reported speed of from Mach 5 to Mach 6.⁴⁰ According to a Russian vice admiral, these submarines will be two times quieter than current subs.⁴¹

Russia also continues to upgrade its diesel electric *Kilo*-class subs.⁴² Because of construction delays, the first of six planned Project 636.3 *Kilo*-class diesel-electric attack submarines will not be delivered until the end of 2020 or in 2021, with all six planned for delivery by 2025.⁴³ According to one analyst, the submarines’ improvement in noise reduction has led them to be nicknamed “Black Holes,” but “the submarine class lacks a functioning air-independent propulsion system, which reduced the boats’ overall stealth capabilities.”⁴⁴

Transport remains a nagging problem, and Russia’s Defense Minister has stressed the paucity of transport vessels. Russia does not have enough air transport, for example, to air-drop its large paratrooper force at one time.⁴⁵ In 2017, 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.⁴⁶

Although 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.⁴⁷ In May 2018, it was reported that Russian testing of the S-500

system struck a target 299 miles away. If true, this is the longest surface-to-air missile test ever conducted, and the S-500's range could have significant implications for European security when the missile becomes operational.⁴⁸

Russia's counterspace and countersatellite capabilities are formidable. A Defense Intelligence Agency report released in February 2019 summarized Russian capabilities:

[O]ver the last two decades, Moscow has been developing a suite of counterspace weapons capabilities, including EW [electronic warfare] to deny, degrade, and disrupt communications and navigation and DEW [directed energy weapons] to deny the use of space-based imagery. Russia is probably also building a ground-based missile capable of destroying satellites in orbit.⁴⁹

In 2018 and 2019, Russia continued tests on an anti-satellite weapon built to target imagery and communications satellites in low Earth orbit.⁵⁰ According to the IISS, modernization priorities for Russia's space force include "restor[ing] Russia's early-warning satellite network, with the re-equipping of the ground-based warning system with *Voronezh* radars nearing completion."⁵¹

Russian Exercises. Russian military exercises, especially snap exercises, are a source of serious concern because they have masked real military operations in the past. Their purpose is twofold: to project strength and to improve command and control. According to Army General Curtis M. Scaparrotti, former Commander, U.S. European Command, "their exercise program demonstrates increasingly sophisticated command and control and integration across multiple warfare areas."⁵²

Exercises in the Baltic Sea in April 2018, a day after the leaders of the three Baltic nations met with President Donald Trump in Washington, were meant as a message. Russia stated twice in April that it planned to conduct three days of live-fire exercises in the Exclusive Economic Zone of Latvia, which forced

a rerouting of commercial aviation as Latvia closed some of its airspace.⁵³ Sweden issued warnings to commercial aviation and sea traffic.⁵⁴ It turned out that Russia did not actually fire any live missiles, and the Latvian Ministry of Defense described the event as "a show of force, nothing else."⁵⁵ The exercises took place near the Karlskrona Naval Base, the Swedish navy's largest base.⁵⁶

Russia's snap exercises are conducted with little or no warning and often involve thousands of troops and pieces of equipment.⁵⁷ In February 2017, for example, Russia ordered snap exercises involving 45,000 troops, 150 aircraft, and 200 anti-aircraft pieces.⁵⁸ The reintroduction of snap exercises has "significantly improved the Russian Armed Forces' warfighting and power-projection capabilities," according to one account. "These, in turn, support and enable Russia's strategic destabilisation campaign against the West, with military force always casting a shadow of intimidation over Russia's sub-kinetic aggression."⁵⁹

Snap exercises have been used for military campaigns as well. According to General Scaparrotti, "the annexation of Crimea took place in connection with a snap exercise by Russia."⁶⁰

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."⁶¹

Russia conducted its VOSTOK ("East") strategic exercises, held primarily in the Eastern Military District, mainly in August and September of 2018 and purportedly with 300,000 troops, 1,000 aircraft, and 900 tanks taking part.⁶² Russia's Defense Minister claimed that the exercises were the largest to take place in Russia since 1981; however, some analysis suggests that the actual number of participating combat troops was in the range 75,000–100,000.⁶³ One analyst described the extent of the exercise:

[T]he breadth of the exercise was impressive. It uniquely involved several major military districts, as troops from the Central Military District and the Northern Fleet confronted the Eastern Military District and the Pacific Fleet. After establishing communication links and organizing forces, live firing between September 13–17 [sic] included air strikes, air defence operations, ground manoeuvres and raids, sea assault and landings, coastal defence, and electronic warfare.⁶⁴

Chinese and Mongolian forces also took part, with China sending 3,200 soldiers from the People's Liberation Army along with 900 tanks and 30 fixed-wing aircraft.⁶⁵ Chinese participation was a significant change from past iterations of VOSTOK. However, Chinese forces were likely restricted largely to the Tsugol training ground, and an uninvited Chinese intelligence ship shadowed the Russian Navy's sea exercises during the exercise.⁶⁶

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 non-conventional 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 National Security Strategy 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.⁶⁷

The same 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."⁶⁸ A new version of Russia's military doctrine signed by Putin in December 2014 similarly emphasizes the threat allegedly posed by NATO and global strike systems.⁶⁹

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 arsenal of nuclear weapons 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, and modernization of the nuclear triad will remain a top priority under the new State Armaments Program.⁷⁰ However, an aging nuclear workforce could impede this modernization: "[A]lthough Russia's strategic-defence enterprises appear to have preserved some of their expertise, problems remain, for example, in transferring the necessary skill sets and experience to the younger generation of engineers."⁷¹

Russia currently relies 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.⁷² This arsenal serves as a protective umbrella under which Russia can modernize its conventional forces at a deliberate pace. But while this nuclear deterrent protects it 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 2017, 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.⁷³

General Scaparrotti discussed the risks presented by Russia's possible use of tactical nuclear weapons in his 2019 EUCOM posture statement: "Russia's non-strategic nuclear weapons stockpile is of concern because it facilitates Moscow's mistaken belief that limited nuclear first use, potentially including low-yield weapons, can provide Russia a coercive advantage in crises and at lower levels of conflict."⁷⁴

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.⁷⁵ Russia's reliance on nuclear weapons is based partly on their small cost relative to the cost of conventional weapons, especially in terms of their effect, and on Russia's inability to attract sufficient numbers of high-quality servicemembers. In other words, 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.⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ Russia first

violated the treaty in 2008 and then systematically escalated its violations, moving from testing to producing to deploying the prohibited missile into the field. In early 2017, Russia fully deployed the SSC-X-8 cruise missile in violation of the INF Treaty. Russia has deployed battalions with the cruise missile at a missile test site, Kapustin Yar, in southern Russia; at Kamyshlov, near the border with Kazakhstan; in Shuya, east of Moscow; and in Mozdok, in occupied North Ossetia.⁷⁸ U.S. officials consider the banned cruise missiles to be fully operational.⁷⁹ In December 2018, in response to Russian violations, the U.S. declared Russia to be in material breach of the INF Treaty, a position with which NATO allies were in agreement.⁸⁰ On February 2, 2019, the U.S. suspended its obligations under the INF Treaty.⁸¹

Threat of Regional War

In the view of many U.S. allies, Russia poses a genuine threat. At times, this threat is of a military nature. At other times, Russia uses less conventional tactics such as cyberattacks, 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 the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) 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 Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) 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."⁸² The European External Action Service, diplomatic service of the European Union (EU), estimates that 200 Russian spies are operating in Brussels, which also is the headquarters of NATO.⁸³

On March 4, 2018, Sergei Skripal, a former Russian GRU colonel who was convicted in

2006 of selling secrets to the United Kingdom and freed in a spy swap between the U.S. and Russia in 2010, and his daughter Yulia were poisoned with Novichok nerve agent by Russian security services in Salisbury, U.K. Hundreds of residents could have been contaminated, including a police officer who was exposed to the nerve agent after responding.⁸⁴ It took a year and the work of 190 U.K. Army and Air Force personnel plus contractors to complete the physical cleanup of Salisbury.⁸⁵ On March 15, France, Germany, the U.K., and the U.S. issued a joint statement condemning Russia's use of the nerve agent: "This use of a military-grade nerve agent, of a type developed by Russia, constitutes the first offensive use of a nerve agent in Europe since the Second World War."⁸⁶ U.S. intelligence officials have reportedly linked Russia to the deaths of 14 people in the U.K. alone, many of them Russians who ran afoul of the Kremlin.⁸⁷

Russian intelligence operatives are reportedly mapping U.S. telecommunications infrastructure around the United States, focusing especially on fiber optic cables.⁸⁸ In March 2017, the U.S. charged four people, including two Russian intelligence officials, with directing hacks of user data involving Yahoo and Google accounts.⁸⁹ 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 2016 U.S. election.⁹⁰

Russia has also used its relations with friendly nations—especially Nicaragua—for espionage purposes. In April 2017, Nicaragua began using a Russian-provided satellite station at Managua that, even though the Nicaraguan government denies it is intended for spying, is of concern to the U.S.⁹¹ The Russian-built "counter-drug" center at Las Colinas that opened in November 2017 will likely be "supporting Russian security engagement with the entire region."⁹² Russia also has an agreement with Nicaragua, signed in 2015, that allows access to Nicaraguan ports for its naval vessels.⁹³

Russian Pressure on Central and Eastern Europe. Moscow poses a security challenge to members of NATO that border Russia. Although a conventional Russian attack against a NATO member is unlikely, primarily because it would trigger a NATO response, it cannot be entirely discounted. Russia continues to use cyberattacks, espionage, its significant share of the European energy market, and propaganda to sow discord among NATO member states and undermine the alliance. The Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service's *International Security and Estonia 2019* report states clearly that "The only serious threat to regional security, including the existence and sovereignty of Estonia and other Baltic Sea states, emanates from Russia. It involves not only asymmetrical, covert or political subversion, but also a potential military threat."⁹⁴

After decades of Russian domination, the countries in Central and Eastern Europe 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 this as a pretext for aggression—a view that is not without merit in view of Moscow's irredentist rhetoric and Russia's use of this technique to annex Crimea.

Lithuania's *National Threat Assessment 2019* states that "Russia exploits democratic freedoms and rights for its subversive activity. Under the veil of care for its diaspora, Russia tries to fragment Lithuanian society. Furthermore, while pretending to develop cultural relations, Russia actually promotes its aggressive foreign policy."⁹⁵ Latvian authorities similarly describe the means used by Russia to claim that it is defending the rights of citizens or Russian compatriots: TV propaganda to push discrediting messages about Latvia and stories in which the rights of Russian citizens are allegedly violated; "spreading interpretations of history favourable to Russia within Russia and abroad, as well as actively engaging in military-memorial work";

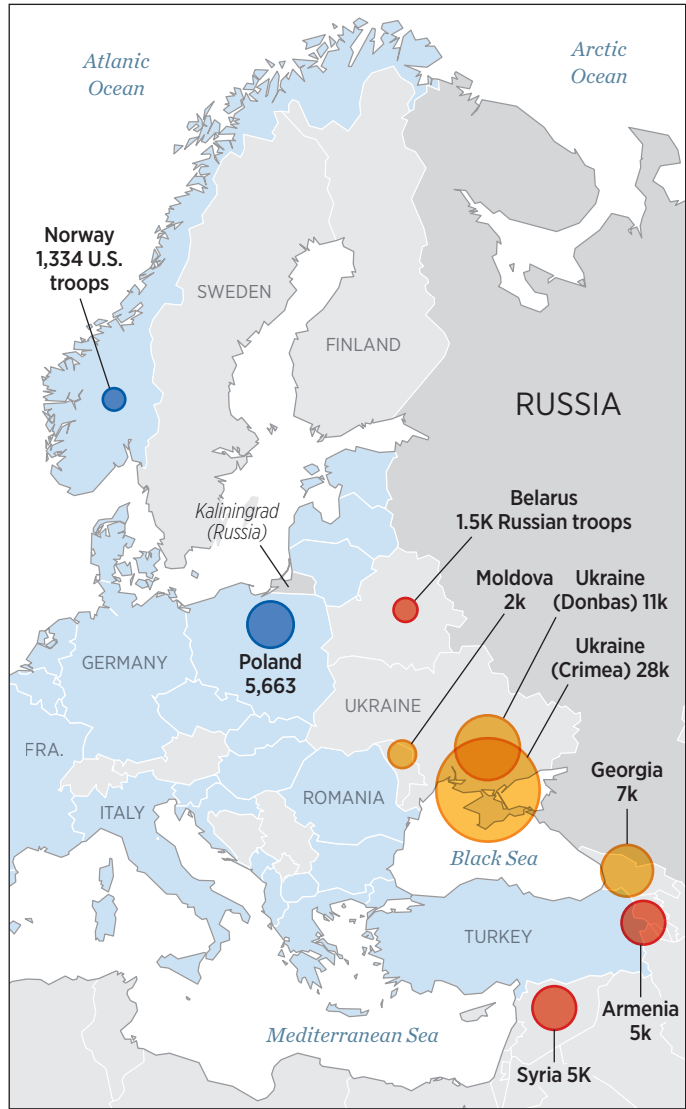
U.S. Troops Greatly Outnumbered Near Russian Border

There are only two NATO nations that directly border Russia and also have U.S. troops stationed inside its borders: Norway and Poland. Even when including rotational troops, U.S. troops there number about 7,000—far less than the 59,500 Russian troops that are, for all intents and purposes, permanently stationed outside its borders on NATO’s perimeter.

- NATO nations
- U.S. troops in NATO nations adjacent to Russia
- Russian troops
- Russian troops in occupied territories

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center, March 2019, and Heritage Foundation research.

 heritage.org



and the use of “compatriot support funds and other compatriot policy bodies” targeted at Latvian youth.⁹⁶

Russia has also sought to undermine the statehood and legitimacy of the Baltic States. In January 2018, for example, Putin signed a decree renaming an air force regiment the “Tallinn Regiment” to “preserve holy historical military traditions” and “raise [the] spirit of military obligation.”⁹⁷ General Scaparrotti testified in March 2017 that 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.”⁹⁸

Russia has sought to use misinformation to undermine NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltics. In April 2017, Russian hackers planted a false story about U.S. troops being poisoned by mustard gas in Latvia on the Baltic News Service website.⁹⁹ Lithuanian parliamentarians and media outlets began to receive e-mails in February 2017 containing a false story that German soldiers had sexually assaulted an underage Lithuanian girl.¹⁰⁰ U.K. forces in Estonia have also been targeted with a

fake news story about British troops harassing an elderly Estonian at a hospital.¹⁰¹

U.S. troops stationed in Poland for NATO's EFP have been the target of similar Russian misinformation campaigns.¹⁰² A fake story that a U.S. Army vehicle had hit and killed a Lithuanian boy during Saber Strike 2018 in June was meant to undermine public support for NATO exercises.¹⁰³ One report summarized that "Russia's state propaganda channels RT and Sputnik remain very keen to exploit to the maximum any incidents involving eFP personnel, and to repeat the Kremlin's anti-NATO and anti eFP narrative."¹⁰⁴ In particular, recent Russian propaganda focuses on portraying EFP as an "occupying force."¹⁰⁵

Russia has also demonstrated a willingness to use military force to change the borders of modern Europe. When Kremlin-backed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich failed to sign an Association Agreement with the EU in 2013, months of street demonstrations led to his ouster early in 2014. Russia responded by 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.¹⁰⁶

Russia's annexation of Crimea has effectively cut Ukraine's coastline in half, and Russia has claimed rights to underwater resources off the Crimean Peninsula.¹⁰⁷ In May 2018, Russia inaugurated the first portion of a \$7.5 billion, 11.8-mile bridge connecting Russia with Kerch in occupied Crimea. The project will be completed in 2023.¹⁰⁸ The effect on Ukraine's regional economic interests can be seen in the fact that 30 percent of the cargo ships that served Mariupol could not clear the span.¹⁰⁹

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.¹¹⁰ Deployment of the Monolit-B radar system, for instance, which has a passive range of 450 km, "provides the Russian military with an excellent real-time picture of

the positions of foreign surface vessels operating in the Black Sea."¹¹¹ In addition, "Russian equipment there includes 40 main battle tanks, 680 armored personnel carriers and 174 artillery systems of various kinds" along with 113 combat aircraft.¹¹² In March 2019, Russia announced the deployment of nuclear-capable Tupolev Tu-22M3 strategic bombers to Gvardeyskoye air base in occupied Crimea.¹¹³

Control of Crimea has allowed Russia to use the Black Sea as a platform to launch and support naval operations in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹¹⁴ The Black Sea fleet has received six *Kilo* diesel submarines and three *Admiral Grigorovich*-class frigates equipped with Kalibr-NK long-range cruise missiles.¹¹⁵ Kalibr cruise missiles have a range of at least 2,500 km, which places cities from Rome to Vilnius within range of Black Sea-based cruise missiles.¹¹⁶

Russia has deployed five S-400 air defense systems with a potential range of around 250 miles to Crimea.¹¹⁷ In addition, "local capabilities have been strengthened by the Pantsir-S1 (SA-22 Greyhound) short-to-medium-range surface-to-air missile (SAM) and anti-aircraft artillery weapons system, which particularly complements the S-400."¹¹⁸ Russia also deploys the Bastion P coastal defenses armed with the P-800 Oniks anti-ship cruise missile, which "has a range of up to 300 kilometers and travels at nearly mach 2.5, making it extraordinarily difficult to defeat with kinetic means."¹¹⁹

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. Around 3,000 Russian soldiers are operating in Ukraine.¹²⁰ Russian-backed separatists daily violate the September 2014 and February 2015 cease-fire agreements, known respectively as Minsk I and Minsk II.¹²¹ 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. The war in Ukraine has cost 13,000 lives and left 30,000 people wounded.¹²²

On November 25, 2018, Russian forces blocked the passage of three Ukrainian naval vessels through the Kerch strait and opened fire on the ships before boarding and seizing them along with 24 Ukrainian sailors.¹²³ Russian harassment of ships sailing through the Kerch strait and impeding of free movement had taken place consistently before the November 25 aggression and continued afterwards.¹²⁴ Russian inspections of ships, blockages of the strait, and delays have coalesced to constrict the port of Mariupol, where shipping volumes in 2018 were 10 percent less than in 2017.¹²⁵

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:

In addition to recent conventional and nuclear developments, 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.¹²⁶

Russia continues to occupy 12 percent of Moldova's territory. In August 2018, Russian and separatist forces equipped with APCs and armored reconnaissance vehicles exercised

crossing the Dniester River in the demilitarized security zone. Moldovan authorities called the exercises "provocative," and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) "expressed its concern."¹²⁷ On January 22, 2019, in an effort to enhance its control of the breakaway region, Russia opened an office in Moscow for the Official Representation of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic in the Russian Federation.¹²⁸

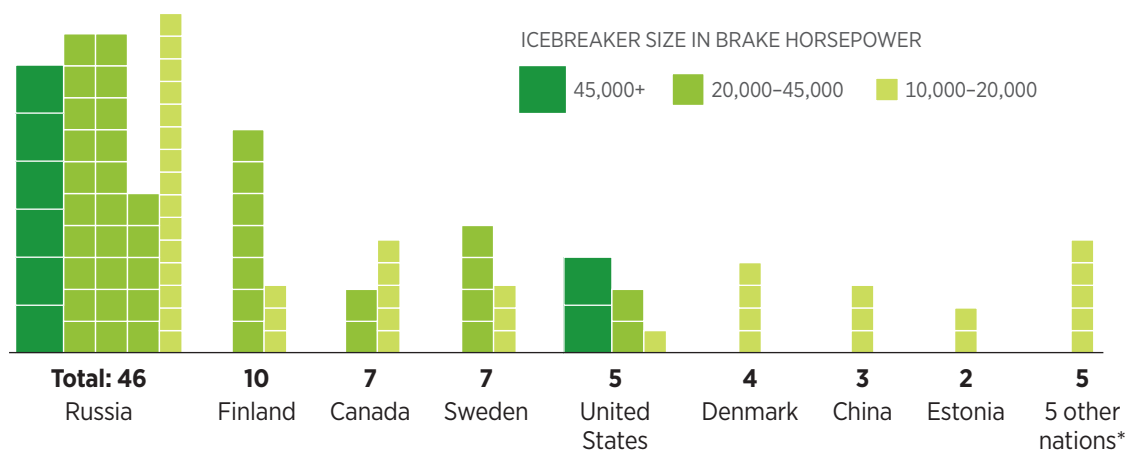
Russia's permanent stationing of Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad in 2018 occurred a year to the day after NATO's EFP deployed to Lithuania.¹²⁹ Russia reportedly has deployed tactical nuclear weapons, the S-400 air defense system, and P-800 anti-ship cruise missiles to Kaliningrad.¹³⁰ Additionally, it plans to reestablish a tank brigade and a "fighter aviation regiment and naval assault aviation (bomber) regiment" in Kaliningrad and to reequip the artillery brigade with new systems.¹³¹

Russia also has outfitted a missile brigade in Luga, Russia, a mere 74 miles from the Estonian city of Narva, with Iskander missiles.¹³² Iskanders have been deployed to the Southern Military District at Mozdok near Georgia and Krasnodar near Ukraine as well, and Russian military officials have reportedly asked manufacturers to increase the Iskander missiles' range and improve their accuracy.¹³³

Nor is Russia 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.¹³⁴ In February 2018, Russia approved the deployment of warplanes to an airport on Iturup, one of the largest islands.¹³⁵ Russia has stationed 3,500 troops on the Kurile Islands. In December 2018, Japan lodged a formal complaint over the building of four new barracks.¹³⁶

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."¹³⁷ In January 2017, Russia's

Russia's Icebreaker Fleet Dominates the Arctic



* Norway, Germany, Latvia, Japan, and South Korea.

NOTE: List includes both government-owned and privately owned icebreakers. List excludes icebreakers for southern hemisphere countries Chile, Australia, South Africa, and Argentina.

SOURCE: Ronald O'Rourke, "Coast Guard Polar Icebreaker Program: Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service Report RL34391, July 9, 2018, p. 10, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/RL34391.pdf> (accessed August 1, 2018).

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Ministry of Defence announced that four S-400 air defense systems would be deployed to the Western Military District.¹³⁸ In January 2016, Commander in Chief of Russian Ground Forces General Oleg Salyukov announced the formation of four new ground divisions, three of them based in the Western Military District, allegedly in response to “intensified exercises of NATO countries.”¹³⁹ According to an assessment published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “[t]he 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.”¹⁴⁰

Militarization of the High North. Russia has taken steps to militarize its presence in the Arctic region. In March 2017, a decree signed by Putin gave the Federal Security Service

(FSB), which controls law enforcement along the Northern Sea Route (NSR), an Arctic shipping route linking Asia and Europe, additional powers to confiscate land “in areas with special objects for land use, and in the border areas.”¹⁴¹ Russia’s Arctic territory is included within this FSB-controlled border zone. The FSB and its subordinate coast guard have added patrol vessels and built up Arctic bases, including a new coast guard base in Murmansk opened in December 2018.¹⁴²

The Russian National Guard, which reports to President Putin,¹⁴³ is also taking on an increased role in the Arctic and is now charged with protecting infrastructure sites that are deemed to be of strategic importance, including a new liquefied natural gas (LNG) export terminal at Sabetta that opened in December 2017.¹⁴⁴ The first shipment of LNG from the Sabetta terminal to China via the NSR took place in July 2018.¹⁴⁵ The National Guard is also

reportedly tasked with security at a planned floating nuclear power plant, currently in Murmansk, that is slated to be towed to the town of Pevek this summer.¹⁴⁶

In May 2018, a presidential decree from Putin set a target of 80 million tons shipped across the NSR by 2024.¹⁴⁷ In 2018, only 18 million tons were shipped across the route.¹⁴⁸ To facilitate attainment of this goal, Russia's state-run Rosatom energy corporation was given nearly sole control of shipping across the NSR in 2018, with the Ministry of Transport retaining only some administrative responsibilities.¹⁴⁹ In March 2019, Russian media reported that the government was drafting stringent navigation rules for the entire length of the NSR outside Russian territorial waters. Under these rules, for example, foreign navies would be required to "post a request with Russian authorities to pass through the *Sevmorput* [NSR] 45 days in advance, providing detailed technical information about the ship, its crew and destination."¹⁵⁰

The Arctic factors into Russia's basing, procurement, and military structuring. 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.¹⁵¹ Two Arctic brigades have been formed, and Arctic Coastal Defense divisions, which will be under the command of the Northern Fleet and stationed in the Kola Peninsula and in Russia's eastern Arctic, are planned.¹⁵² A naval deep-water division, based in Gadzhiyevo in the Murmansk region and directly subordinate to the Minister of Defense, was established in January 2018.¹⁵³

Russia is also investing in military bases in the Arctic. Its base on Alexandra Land, commissioned in 2017, can house 150 soldiers autonomously for up to 18 months.¹⁵⁴ In addition, old Soviet-era facilities have been reopened. The airfield on Kotelný Island, for example, was reactivated in 2013 for the first time in 20 years and "will be manned by 250 personnel and equipped with air defense missiles."¹⁵⁵

In September 2018, the northern fleet announced construction plans for a new military

complex to house a 100-soldier garrison and anti-aircraft units at Tiksi; in January 2019, Russian authorities claimed that the base was 95 percent completed.¹⁵⁶ Also in 2018, Russia opened an Arctic airfield at Nagurskoye that is equipped with a 2,500-meter landing strip and a fleet of MiG-31 or Su-34 Russian fighters.¹⁵⁷

In fact, air power in the Arctic is increasingly important to Russia, which has 14 operational airfields in the region along with 16 deep-water ports.¹⁵⁸ In March 2019, Mayor General Igor Kozhin, head of the Russian Naval Air Force, claimed that Russia had successfully tested a new airstrip cover that is effective in "temperatures down to minus 30 centigrades."¹⁵⁹ In 2018, according to the Russian Ministry of Defense, "Russian Tu-142 Bear and Il-38 May maritime patrol and anti-submarine warfare aircraft, as well as Su-24MR Fencer tactical reconnaissance jets, flew more than 100 sorties in total above the Arctic circle."¹⁶⁰

Russia also intends to undertake regular fighter jet combat patrols in the Arctic in 2019.¹⁶¹ As an example, the Russian Ministry of Defense announced that in January 2019, two Tu-160 bombers flew for 15 hours in international airspace over the Arctic.¹⁶² Over the course of one week in April 2019, Russian fighter and bomber jets flew near the coast of Norway twice. In one instance, two TU-60 bombers and a MiG-31 flew 13 hours over the Barents, Norwegian, and North Seas. British and Danish jets scrambled to meet the Russian aircraft.¹⁶³

Russian Arctic flights are often aggressive. In March 2017, nine Russian bombers simulated an attack on the U.S.-funded, Norwegian-run radar installation at Vardø, Norway, above the Arctic Circle.¹⁶⁴ In May 2017, 12 Russian aircraft simulated an attack against NATO naval forces taking part in the EASTLANT17 exercise near Tromsø, Norway, and later that month, Russian aircraft targeted aircraft from 12 nations, including the U.S., that took part in the Arctic Challenge 2017 exercise near Bodø.¹⁶⁵ In April 2018, Maritime Patrol Aircraft from Russia's Pacific Fleet for the first time exercised locating and bombing enemy submarines

in the Arctic, while fighter jets exercised repelling an air invasion in the Arctic region.¹⁶⁶

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.¹⁶⁷ In 2017, Russia activated a new radar complex on Wrangel Island.¹⁶⁸ This year, Russia plans to lay a nearly 8,000-mile fiber optic cable across its Arctic coast, linking military installations along the way from the Kola Peninsula through Vladivostok.¹⁶⁹ In November 2019, Russia announced rocket firings in the Norwegian Sea 20 to 40 nautical miles from the Norwegian coast. The test firings, with little advance notice, were designed to send a message as they took place in an area through which NATO ships were sailing during the Trident Juncture exercise.¹⁷⁰

Russia's ultimate goal is to have a combined Russian armed force deployed in the Arctic by 2020,¹⁷¹ and it appears that Moscow is on track to accomplish this. Russia is developing equipment optimized for Arctic conditions like the Mi-38 helicopter and three new nuclear icebreakers to add to the 40 icebreakers already in service, six of which are nuclear.¹⁷² Former U.S. Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Paul F. Zukunft has expressed concern that "Russia is probably going to launch two icebreaking corvettes with cruise missiles on them over the course of the next several years."¹⁷³

In July 2017, Russia released a new naval doctrine citing the alleged "ambition of a range of states, and foremost the United States of America and its allies, to dominate the high seas, including in the Arctic, and to press for overwhelming superiority of their naval forces."¹⁷⁴ In May 2017, Russia announced that its buildup of the Northern Fleet's nuclear capacity is intended "to phase 'NATO out of [the] Arctic.'"¹⁷⁵

Russia's Northern Fleet is also building newly refitted submarines, including a newly converted *Belgorod* nuclear-powered submarine that is expected to be launched in the summer of 2019 and to enter active duty in 2020.¹⁷⁶

The *Belgorod* is expected to carry six Poseidon drones, also known as nuclear torpedoes, and will carry out "covert missions."¹⁷⁷ The submarine will have a smaller mini-sub potentially capable of tampering with or destroying undersea telecommunications cables.¹⁷⁸ According to Russian media reports, the *Belgorod* "will be engaged in studying the bottom of the Russian Arctic shelf, searching for minerals at great depths, and also laying underwater communications."¹⁷⁹ A similar submarine, the *Khabarovsk*, is under construction and could enter active duty as early as 2022.¹⁸⁰

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. A decade later, several thousand Russian troops occupied the two Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Russia has sought to deepen its relationship with the two occupied regions. In 2015, it signed so-called integration treaties with South Ossetia and Abkhazia that, among other things, 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.¹⁸¹ The Georgian Foreign Ministry criticized the treaties as a step toward "annexation of Georgia's occupied territories,"¹⁸² both of which are still internationally recognized as part of Georgia. In January 2018, Russia ratified an agreement with the de facto leaders of South Ossetia to create

a joint military force—an agreement that the U.S. condemned.¹⁸³ In November 2017, the U.S. State Department approved an estimated \$75 million sale of Javelin missiles to Georgia.¹⁸⁴

Russia’s “creeping annexation” of Georgia has left towns split in two and families separated by military occupation and the imposition of an internal border (known as “borderization”).¹⁸⁵ As summarized in a previous Heritage Foundation study:

The most egregious example of “borderization” since the 2008 war took place in July and August 2015, when Russia annexed an additional 300 acres of Georgian territory. During this time Russia built a fence within 550 yards of Georgia’s E60 highway, which is the main road in the South Caucasus linking the Black Sea to Azerbaijan. A “State Border” sign installed by Russian authorities is also visible from the highway. This annexation placed a one-mile segment of the BP-operated Baku-Supsa pipeline inside Russian-occupied territory.¹⁸⁶

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 that gives Moscow access to bases in that country until at least 2044.¹⁸⁷ The bulk of Russia’s forces, consisting of 3,300 soldiers, dozens of fighter planes and attack helicopters, 74 T-72 tanks, almost 200 armored personnel carriers, and an S-300 air defense system, are based around the 102nd Military Base.¹⁸⁸ Russia and Armenia have also signed a Combined Regional Air Defense System agreement. Even after

the election of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan following the so-called Velvet Revolution, Armenia’s cozy relationship with Moscow remains unchanged.¹⁸⁹ Armenian troops have even deployed alongside Russian troops in Syria to the dismay of U.S. policymakers.¹⁹⁰

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.¹⁹¹ By 1992, Armenian forces and Armenian-backed militias had 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.¹⁹² In early summer 2018, Azerbaijani forces successfully launched an operation to retake territory around Gündüt, a small village strategically located in the mountainous region of Azerbaijan’s Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic.¹⁹³ The 2016 and 2018 incidents marked the only changes in territory since 1994.¹⁹⁴

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.¹⁹⁵ 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.”¹⁹⁶

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 both on U.S. interests and on the security of America’s partners, as well as on Turkey and other countries that depend on oil and gas transiting the region.

Increased Russian Activity in the Mediterranean. 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 strengthened his hand militarily, thus enabling government forces to retake territory lost during the war. Russia's activities in Syria, by allowing Assad to stay in power, have made achievement of a peaceful political settlement with rebel groups nearly impossible as a practical matter.

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 [the facility's] present known capacity."¹⁹⁷ It was subsequently reported that Russia was expanding the Tartus base to include a submarine maintenance facility.¹⁹⁸

The agreement with Syria also includes upgrades to the Hmeymim air base at Latakia, including repairs to a second runway.¹⁹⁹ Russia deployed the S-400 anti-aircraft missile system to Hmeymim in late 2015.²⁰⁰ It also has deployed the Pantsir S1 system. "The two systems working in tandem provide a 'layered defense,'" according to one account, "with the S-400 providing long-ranged protection against bombers, fighter jets, and ballistic missiles, and the Pantsir providing medium-ranged protection against cruise missiles, low-flying strike aircraft, and drones."²⁰¹ Russia currently operates out of Hmeymim air base on a 40-year agreement and continues to entrench its position there, as demonstrated by its recent building of reinforced concrete aircraft shelters.²⁰²

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, former Commander, U.S. Army Europe, Russia has used its intervention in Syria as a "live-fire training opportunity."²⁰³ According to the IISS, Russia has

used Syria as "a test bed for the development of joint operations and new weapons and tactics."²⁰⁴ Russia has tested hundreds of pieces of new equipment in Syria. In December 2018:

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yury Borisov detailed to local media...the various new weapons systems [that] have been introduced to the conflict. These included the Pantsir S1 anti-aircraft and Iskander-M ballistic missile systems on the ground, Tupolev Tu-160 supersonic strategic bombers, Tu-22M3 supersonic bombers and Tu-95 propeller-driven bombers, as well as Mikoyan MiG-29K fighters and Ka-52K Katran helicopters in the air.²⁰⁵

Despite this display of Russian arms in Syria, however, Russian weapons exports have declined, in part because India and China are developing more weapons systems domestically, thereby reducing their desire to purchase items from Russia.²⁰⁶ According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "[a]rms exports by Russia decreased by 17 percent between 2009–13 and 2014–18."²⁰⁷

Russian pilots have occasionally acted dangerously in the skies over Syria. In May 2017, for example, a Russian fighter jet intercepted a U.S. KC-10 tanker, performing a barrel roll over the top of the KC-10.²⁰⁸ 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."²⁰⁹ The U.S. and Russia have a deconfliction hotline to avoid midair collisions and incidents, but incidents have occurred on the ground as well as in the air. In November 2018, Ambassador James Jeffrey, U.S. Special Representative for Syria Engagement, told news media that "American and Russian forces have clashed a dozen times in Syria—sometimes with exchanges of fire."²¹⁰

In October 2018, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi signed a strategic cooperation treaty with Russia.²¹¹ In November 2018,

Russia sought to solidify its relations with Egypt, approving a five-year agreement for the two countries to use each other's air bases.²¹² Russia is a major exporter of arms to Egypt, which agreed to purchase 20 Su-35 fighter jets in 2018 for \$2 billion.²¹³ In Libya, Russia continues to support Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar with weapons and military advisers. Russian Special Forces reportedly have been deployed to assist Haftar, and 300 mercenaries from Russia's Wagner Group are believed to be in Libya.²¹⁴ Despite its ties to Haftar, Russia has also focused on growing business ties with the Libyan government in Tripoli.²¹⁵

Russia has stepped up its military operations in the Mediterranean significantly, often harassing U.S. and allied vessels taking part in counter-IS operations. In April 2018, for example, a fully armed Russian Su-24M Fencer and Su-30SM Flanker fighter aircraft flew aggressively low over the *Aquitaine*, a French frigate operating in the eastern Mediterranean.²¹⁶ That same month, one or two improved *Kilo*-class submarines, two Russian frigates, and Russian anti-submarine aircraft pursued a British *Astute*-class attack submarine operating in the Mediterranean near Syria. The British sub received assistance from U.S. P-8As operating in the region.²¹⁷

In addition, the U.S., along with British, Dutch, and Spanish allies, tracked the *Krasnodar*, a *Kilo*-class submarine, as it sailed from the Baltic Sea to a Russian base in occupied Crimea from April–August 2017. The submarine stopped twice in the eastern Mediterranean to launch cruise missiles into Syria and conducted drills in the Baltic Sea and off the coast of Libya. This was one of the first times since the Cold War that the U.S. and NATO allies had tracked a Russian submarine during combat operations.²¹⁸ In March 2019, General Scaparrotti testified that:

The Kremlin has also demonstrated the ability and political will to deploy its modernized military and expand its operational footprint. Last year we observed a historically high combat maritime

presence in the East Mediterranean along with military deployments and demonstrations in Syria. Their most advanced and quietest guided missile submarine, the Severodvinsk, conducted extended deployments in the northern Atlantic.²¹⁹

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.

Russia's interests in the Western Balkans are at odds with the ongoing desire of the U.S. and its European allies to encourage closer ties between the region and the transatlantic community:

Russia seeks to sever the transatlantic bond forged with the Western Balkans... by sowing instability. Chiefly Russia has sought to inflame preexisting ethnic, historic, and religious tensions. Russian propaganda magnifies this toxic ethnic and religious messaging, fans public disillusionment with the West, as well as institutions inside the Balkan nations, and misinforms the public about Russia's intentions and interests in the region.²²⁰

Senior members of the Russian government have alleged that NATO enlargement in the Balkans is one of the biggest threats to Russia.²²¹ In June 2017, Montenegro became NATO's 29th member state, joining Albania and Croatia (and soon probably North Macedonia) as NATO members 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. Two Russian nationals believed to be the masterminds behind the plot were convicted in absentia in May 2019 along with 12 other individuals for organizing and carrying out the failed coup. The trial judge stated that

the convicted Russians who organized the plot “knowingly tried to terrorize Montenegrins, attack others, threaten and hurt basic constitutional and social structures.”²²²

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. In 2018, “Russia account[ed] for one-third of [foreign direct investment] to Montenegro, and Russian nationals or companies own 40 percent of real estate in the nation—as well as almost one-third of all Montenegrin companies.”²²³

Similarly, North Macedonia’s accession to NATO has been heavily targeted by Russia, which had warned the nation against joining the alliance²²⁴ and sought to derail the Prespa agreement that paved the way for membership by settling long-standing Greek objections to Macedonia’s name. In 2018, after North Macedonia was invited to join NATO, Russia’s ambassador to the EU stated that “there are errors that have consequences.”²²⁵ In July 2018, Greece expelled two Russian diplomats and banned entry by two Russian nationals because of their efforts to undermine the name agreement; Russian actions in Macedonia included disinformation surrounding the vote, websites and social media posts opposing the Prespa agreement, and payments to protesters as well as politicians and organizations opposing the agreement.²²⁶

Serbia in particular has long served as Russia’s foothold in the Balkans:

Russia’s influence in the Balkans centers on Serbia, a fellow religiously orthodox nation with whom it enjoys a close economic, political, and military relationship. Serbia and Russia have an agreement in place allowing Russian soldiers to be based at Niš airport in Serbia. The two countries signed a 15-year military cooperation agreement in 2013 that includes sharing of intelligence, officer exchanges,

and joint military exercises. In October, Russia gave Serbia six MiG-29 fighters (which while free, will require Serbia to spend \$235 million to have them overhauled). Additionally, Russia plans to supply Serbia with helicopters, T-72 tanks, armored vehicles, and potentially even surface-to-air missile systems.²²⁷

The so-called Russian–Serbian Humanitarian Center at Niš is “widely believed to be a Russian spy base” and is located “only 58 miles from NATO’s Kosovo Force mission based in Pristina.”²²⁸ Russia has used its cultural ties to Serbia to increase its role in the nation, positioning itself as the defender of orthodoxy and investing funds in the refurbishing of orthodox churches. Additionally, Russia has helped to establish more than 100 pro-Russian NGOs and media outlets in Macedonia.²²⁹

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. In January 2019, Serbia and Russia signed 26 agreements relating to energy, railway construction, and strategic education cooperation.²³⁰

In a January 2019 state visit to Serbia, Vladimir Putin stated a desire for a free trade agreement between Serbia and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, to be signed by the end of the year. Additionally, Russia has held out the possibility of \$1.4 billion in infrastructure aid to Serbia aimed at building the Turk Stream pipeline and increasing Russia’s energy leverage in the region. Russia also has continued to oppose Kosovo’s recognition as an independent sovereign country and has condemned Kosovo’s creation of its own army.²³¹

However, Serbia still participates in military exercises far more without Russia than with Russia. “In 2017,” for example, “Serbian forces participated in 2 joint exercises with Russia and Belarus but held 13 exercises with NATO members and 7 with U.S. units.”²³² 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. Moscow knows that exploiting internal ethnic and religious divisions among the country's Bosniak, Croat, and Serb 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 September 2018, two weeks before elections in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov visited Sarajevo, but he also visited Banja Luka in Republika Srpska, where he visited the site of "a future Serbian-Russian Orthodox cultural center."²³³

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 like 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.²³⁴ In October 2018, just days before elections, Dodik again visited Russia where he watched the Russian Grand Prix in a VIP box with Putin.²³⁵ Republika Srpska continues to host 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.²³⁶ 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."²³⁷

On January 9, 2019, Bosnian Serbs again held "statehood day."²³⁸ At the 2018 "statehood day," Dodik and the self-proclaimed leaders of South Ossetia "signed a memorandum on cooperation between the 'states.'"²³⁹ Russia has reportedly trained a Republika Srpska paramilitary force in Russia at the nearby Niš airbase to defend the Serbian entity. It has been reported that "[s]ome of its members fought as mercenaries alongside the Kremlin's proxy separatists in Ukraine."²⁴⁰ Veterans organizations in Russia and Republika Srpska have developed close ties.²⁴¹

Russia has cultivated strong ties with the security forces of Republika Srpska. Russian police take part in exchanges with the security forces, and Russian intelligence officers reportedly teach at the police academy and local university. In addition:

The Republika Srpska authorities are also opening a new \$4 million dollar training center at the site of a former army barracks in Zaluzani, outside Banja Luka. Russia has already committed to provide Serb forces with anti-terrorism training at the center, which will serve as the headquarters for new anti-terrorist units, logistics units, and a department to combat organized crime. These additions will put the Serbian police closer on par with Bosnia's national security forces.

There is also ongoing discussion in Republika Srpska of creating of a Russian "humanitarian" center similar to one already established in the Serbian city of Nis. Officially, its purpose is to help the local government with natural disasters such as floods and fires. But the center in Nis has been suspected of serving as a Russian intelligence center and an unofficial

military base—not least because Russia has requested diplomatic immunity for its personnel stationed there.²⁴²

Russia does not want Kosovo to be seen as a successful nation pointed toward the West. Rather, it seeks to derail Kosovo's efforts to integrate into the West, often by exploiting the Serbian minority's grievances. In the most jarring example, in January 2017, 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 featured pictures of churches, monasteries, and medieval towns, as well as the words 'Kosovo is Serbian' in 21 languages."²⁴³

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.

Threats to the Commons

Other than cyberspace and (to some extent) airspace, the commons are relatively secure in the European region. Despite Russia's periodic aggressive maneuvers near U.S. and NATO vessels, this remains largely true with respect to the security of and free passage through shipping lanes (with the significant exception of the Kerch strait). 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.

Sea. In May 2018, 17 Russian fighter jets buzzed the HMS *Duncan*, which was serving as the flagship of Standing NATO Maritime Group Two (SNMG2), operating in the Black Sea. Commodore Mike Utley, who was leading SNMG2, stated that the ship was "probably the only maritime asset that has seen a raid of that magnitude in the last 25 years," and

then-British Defense Minister Gavin Williamson described the behavior as "brazen Russian hostility."²⁴⁴ In April 2018, a fully armed Russian jet buzzed a French frigate operating in the eastern Mediterranean.²⁴⁵

Russian threats to the maritime theater also include activity near undersea fiber optic cables. In December 2017, Rear Admiral Andrew Lennon, Commander, Submarines NATO, stated that "[w]e are now seeing Russian underwater activity in the vicinity of undersea cables that I don't believe we have ever seen."²⁴⁶ On any given day, undersea cables "carry some \$10 trillion of financial transfers and process some 15 million financial transactions," to say nothing of the breadth of nonfinancial information and communications that they carry.²⁴⁷

The *Yantar*, a mother ship to two Russian mini submersibles, is often seen near undersea cables, which it is capable of tapping or cutting, and has been observed collecting intelligence near U.S. naval facilities, including the submarine base at Kings Bay, Georgia.²⁴⁸ The Russian spy ship *Viktor Leonov* was spotted collecting intelligence within 20 miles of Kings Bay in March 2017 and within 30 miles of Groton, Connecticut, in February 2018.²⁴⁹

Airspace. Russia has continued its provocative military flights near U.S. and European airspace over the past year. In January 2018, a Russian Su-27 fighter intercepted a U.S. surveillance aircraft operating over the Black Sea, forcing it to return to base. "This interaction was determined to be unsafe," according to a statement from the U.S. 6th Fleet, "due to the SU-27 closing to within five feet and crossing directly through the EP-3's flight path, causing the EP-3 to fly through the SU-27's jet wash."²⁵⁰

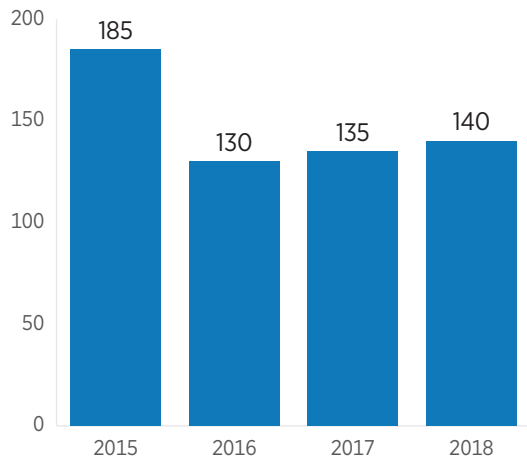
In November 2017, a Russian Su-30 fighter flew within 50 feet of a U.S. P-8A flying over the Black Sea in a 24-minute intercept that the U.S. also called "unsafe." Specifically, "the aircraft crossed in front of the US plane from right to left while engaging its afterburners, forcing the P-8 to enter its jet wash, an action that caused the US plane to experience 'a 15-degree roll and violent turbulence,'" according to a Pentagon spokeswoman.²⁵¹

NATO Frequently Scrambles Military Aircraft Over Baltics

NATO maintains a 24/7 air policing mission to safeguard the integrity of Baltic member states' airspace. NATO aircraft rotationally deployed are scrambled in response to aircraft that do not comply with international flight regulations and approach allies' airspace—such as common incursions by Russian jets.

SOURCE: Data provided by NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Power Europe.

NATO BALTIC-AREA JET SCRAMBLES



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In March and April 2019, the Royal Air Force scrambled fighters twice in five days to intercept Russian bombers flying near U.K. airspace off Scotland while the U.S., Australia, and 11 NATO allies were taking part in the Joint Warrior exercise in Scotland.²⁵² Also in March 2019, Italian jets operating from Keflavík intercepted two Russian Tu-142 Bear bombers flying in Iceland's air surveillance area.²⁵³ In January 2019, a day after a new government was formed in Stockholm, a Russian IL-20 reconnaissance plane escorted by two Russian Su-27 fighter jets violated Swedish airspace, flying with transponders turned off.²⁵⁴

Aggressive Russian flying has occurred near North American airspace as well. In January 2019, two U.S. F-22s and two Canadian CF-18 fighters scrambled when two Russian Tu-160 Blackjack bombers flew into Arctic airspace patrolled by the Royal Canadian Air Force.²⁵⁵

Russian flights have also targeted U.S. ally Japan. In incidents in January, March, and May 2019, Japan scrambled fighter jets to intercept a Russian Il-38N maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) flying over the Sea of Japan.²⁵⁶ Nor is it only MPA that fly near Japan; for instance, Russian Su-24 attack aircraft were intercepted

in December 2018 and January 2019 incidents.²⁵⁷ Between April 1, 2018, and March 31, 2019, Japan had to scramble jets 343 times to intercept Russian aircraft, although that was 47 times less than the year prior.²⁵⁸

The main threat from Russian airspace incursions, however, remains near NATO territory in Eastern Europe, specifically in the Black Sea and Baltic regions. In the Baltics, through mid-November, NATO aircraft had conducted 85 Alpha scrambles in 2018, compared with 130 Alpha scrambles of Russian military aircraft in 2017.²⁵⁹ The situation remains the same in 2019. In one week in March, NATO jets scrambled six times to escort Russian aircraft flying over the Baltic Sea. The Lithuanian Defense Ministry reported that “several of them had not kept in radio contact with regional air traffic control, nor filed a pre-flight plan, nor had onboard transponders functioning.”²⁶⁰

In July 2018, Vladimir Putin's plane briefly flew over Estonian airspace without either filing a flight plan or contacting Estonian air traffic control on the way to Helsinki for a meeting with President Trump.²⁶¹ Similar provocative flights took place in the Black Sea region in 2018, including one in August when

two British Typhoons that were taking part in NATO's enhanced air policing mission scrambled to intercept and escort two Russian planes that were flying in Romanian airspace.²⁶²

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.²⁶³ Similarly, in March 2014, a Scandinavian Airlines plane almost collided with a Russian signals intelligence (SIGINT) plane when the two came within 90 meters of each other.²⁶⁴ 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.²⁶⁵

Cyber. Russian cyber capabilities are sophisticated and active, regularly threatening economic, social, and political targets around the world. Even more, Moscow appears to be increasingly aggressive in its use of digital techniques, often employing only the slightest veneer of deniability in an effort to intimidate targets and openly defy international norms and organizations. Russia clearly believes that these online operations will be essential to its domestic and foreign policy for the foreseeable future. As former Chief of the Russian General Staff General Yuri Baluyevsky has observed, “[cyberattacks are] 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.”²⁶⁶

Russia continues to probe U.S. critical infrastructure. According to former Director of National Intelligence Daniel R. Coats:

Russia has the ability to execute cyber attacks in the United States that generate localized, temporary disruptive effects on critical infrastructure—such as disrupting an electrical distribution network for at least a few hours—similar to those

demonstrated in Ukraine in 2015 and 2016. Moscow is mapping our critical infrastructure with the long-term goal of being able to cause substantial damage.²⁶⁷

Russia has continued to conduct cyberattacks on government and private entities in 2019. In January, hackers affiliated with the Russian intelligence services hacked the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Also in 2019, the Democratic National Committee revealed that it had been hacked by Russia following the 2018 midterm elections.²⁶⁸

In June 2018, the U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned five Russian entities and three Russian individuals for “malign and destabilizing” cyber activities, including “the destructive NotPetya cyber-attack; cyber intrusions against the U.S. energy grid to potentially enable future offensive operations; and global compromises of network infrastructure devices, including routers and switches, also to potentially enable disruptive cyber-attacks.”²⁶⁹ These sanctions built on a joint assessment by the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI that Russian hackers were behind a series of attacks against American network infrastructure devices and the U.S. energy and critical infrastructure sectors.²⁷⁰

But the United States is not Russia’s only target. In April 2018 alone, Germany’s head of domestic intelligence accused Moscow of attacking his government’s computer networks, and the U.K.’s National Cyber Security Center warned that Russian hackers were targeting Britain’s critical infrastructure supply chains. Russia continues to employ cyber as a key tool in manipulating and undermining democratic elections in Europe and elsewhere.

In addition to official intelligence and military cyber assets, Russia continues to employ allied criminal organizations (so-called patriotic hackers) to help it engage in cyber aggression. Using these hackers gives Russia greater resources and can help to shield their true capabilities. Patriotic hackers also give the Russian government deniability when it is desired. In June 2017, 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.”²⁷¹

Conclusion

Overall, the threat to the U.S. homeland originating from Europe remains low, but the threat to America’s 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 its efforts 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 ever since its creation in 1949, and it is in America’s interest to ensure that it maintains both the military capability and the 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 that are much less serious than 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. As the 2019 Worldwide Threat Assessment states:

Moscow will continue pursuing a range of objectives to expand its reach, including undermining the US-led liberal international order, dividing Western political and security institutions, demonstrating Russia’s ability to shape global issues, and bolstering Putin’s domestic legitimacy. Russia seeks to capitalize on perceptions of US retrenchment and power vacuums, which it views the United States is unwilling or unable to fill, by pursuing relatively low-cost options, including influence campaigns, cyber tools, and limited military interventions.²⁷²

For these reasons, this *Index* continues to assess the threat from Russia as “aggressive” and “formidable.”

Threats: Russia

	HOSTILE	AGGRESSIVE	TESTING	ASSERTIVE	BENIGN
Behavior		✓			
	FORMIDABLE	GATHERING	CAPABLE	ASPIRATIONAL	MARGINAL
Capability	✓				

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