

Russia

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Russia remains a formidable threat to the United States and its 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 remains antagonistic to the United States both militarily and politically, and its efforts to undermine U.S. institutions and the NATO alliance continue without let-up. In Europe, Russia uses its energy position along with espionage, cyberattacks, and information warfare to exploit vulnerabilities with the goal of dividing the transatlantic alliance and undermining people's faith in government and societal institutions.

Overall, Russia possesses 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.

Military Capabilities. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), among the key weapons in Russia's inventory are 340 intercontinental ballistic missiles, 2,800 main battle tanks, more than 5,160 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; 49 submarines (including 10 ballistic missile submarines); four

cruisers; 13 destroyers; 15 frigates; and 118 patrol and coastal combatants. The air force has 1,183 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 In addition, 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. It 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 July 2020, for example, Russia deployed 33 Wagner Group mercenaries to Belarus to create additional political turmoil ahead of the August presidential election.⁴ Russia also prepared a law enforcement team, likely including military troops, after the election “to help shore up Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko if protests against him spiral[ed] out of control.”⁵ In February 2018, 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.⁶ Approximately 30 U.S. Rangers and Delta Force special operators were also at the base.⁷ U.S. air strikes helped to repulse the attack, and “three sources familiar with the matter” estimated that

approximately 300 Russian mercenaries were either killed or wounded.⁸

In January 2019, reports surfaced that 400 Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group were in Venezuela to bolster the regime of Nicolas Maduro.⁹ Russian propaganda in Venezuela has supported the regime and stoked fears of American imperialism. In February 2020, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Venezuela to “counteract U.S. sanctions” and show support for Maduro.¹⁰ During the past few years, as the crisis has metastasized and protests against the Maduro regime have grown, Russia has begun to deploy troops and supplies to bolster Maduro’s security forces.¹¹ In December 2018, for example, Russia temporarily deployed two Tu-160 nuclear-capable bombers to Caracas.¹² Russia also 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.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ Although Putin could issue a directive to deploy this force abroad,¹⁶ he is more likely to use it to stifle domestic dissent.

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected Russia’s economic growth.¹⁷ In the first quarter of 2020, economic growth in Russia “slowed to 1.6 percent...before sliding into a projected contraction in the second quarter caused by lockdowns aimed at curbing the new coronavirus outbreak.”¹⁸ Because of the steep economic downturns from the coronavirus, Russia will likely have difficulty funding military affairs. However, 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 \$65.1 billion on its military in 2019, which is 4.5 percent more than it spent in 2018.¹⁹ This increase in spending enabled Russia to rejoin the ranks of the world’s top five defense spending nations in 2019.²⁰

Much of Russia’s military expenditure goes toward modernization of its armed forces. In January 2018, then-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.”²¹ From 2010 to 2019, close to 40 percent of Russia’s total military spending was on arms procurement.²² Taking into account total military expenditure, Russia spent nearly 4 percent of GDP on defense in 2019.²³

In early 2018, Russia introduced its 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.”²⁴

Russia’s nuclear capabilities have been prioritized for modernization, and approximately 82 percent of its nuclear forces have been modernized.²⁵ 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.²⁶ The missile, which can carry up to 15 warheads, underwent flight development tests from April–June 2019.²⁷ According to a March 2020 report, Russia upgraded its facilities for production of the RS-28 missile.²⁸

The armed forces also continue to undergo process modernization, which was begun by Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov in 2008.²⁹ 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.³⁰

In April 2020, the Kremlin revealed that it had begun state trials for its T-14 Armata main battle tank in Syria.³¹ Aside from the T-14 Armata, Russia has resumed upgrades to the T-72B3 and T-80BVM main battle tanks.³² 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.³³ Russia lost one of its Su-27 jets near the Crimean coast during a planned mission in March 2020.³⁴

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.³⁵ The carrier is not likely to be salvaged. In May 2019, reports surfaced that Russia is seeking to begin building a new nuclear-powered aircraft carrier in 2023 for delivery in the late 2030s, but the procurement's financial and technological feasibility remains questionable.³⁶

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.³⁷ Russia is also reportedly deploying Kalibr cruise missiles to submarines and surface vessels operating in the Western Atlantic.³⁸

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, but 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.³⁹ Nevertheless, on April 23, 2019, keel-laying ceremonies took place for the fifth and sixth *Admiral Gorshkov*-class frigates, which reportedly will join Russia's Black Sea fleet.⁴⁰

Russia plans to procure eight *Lider*-class guided missile destroyers for its Northern and Pacific Fleets, but procurement has faced

consistent delay.⁴¹ As of April 2020, Russia's Severnoye Design Bureau halted development of the frigates entirely because of financial setbacks.⁴²

In November 2018, Russia sold three *Admiral Grigoryevich*-class frigates to India. Russia is set to deliver at least two of the frigates to India by 2024.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

Russia's naval modernization continues to prioritize submarines. According to the IISS, "[s]ubmarine 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."⁴⁵ 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 6.⁴⁶ According to a Russian vice admiral, these submarines will be two times quieter than current subs.⁴⁷

Russia also continues to upgrade its diesel electric *Kilo*-class subs.⁴⁸ It reportedly inducted the first improved Project 636.6 *Kilo*-class submarine into its Pacific Fleet in November 2019.⁴⁹ According to one assessment, the submarines' improvement in noise reduction has caused them to be nicknamed "Black Holes," but "the submarine class lacks a functioning air-independent propulsion system, which reduced the boats' overall stealth capabilities."⁵⁰

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 airdrop all of its large paratrooper force at one time.⁵¹ 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.⁵²

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.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ According to Sergei Chemezov, CEO of Russian defense conglomerate Rostec, the S-500 system supposedly will enter service "very soon."⁵⁵

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.⁵⁶

In 2018, in 2019, and early in 2020,⁵⁷ Russia continued tests on an anti-satellite weapon built to target imagery and communications satellites in low Earth orbit.⁵⁸ 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."⁵⁹

Military 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 Air Force

General Tod D. Wolters, Commander, U.S. European Command (EUCOM):

Russia employs a *below-the-threshold of armed conflict* strategy via proxies and intermediary forces in an attempt to weaken, divide, and intimidate our Allies and partners using a range of covert, difficult-to-attribute, and malign actions. These actions include information and cyber operations, election meddling, political subversion, economic intimidation, military sales, exercises, and the calculated use of force.⁶⁰

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 Latvia's Exclusive Economic Zone, forcing a rerouting of commercial aviation as Latvia closed some of its airspace.⁶¹ Sweden issued warnings to commercial aviation and sea traffic.⁶² 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."⁶³ The exercises took place near the Karlskrona Naval Base, the Swedish navy's largest base.⁶⁴

Russia's snap exercises are conducted with little or no warning and often involve thousands of troops and pieces of equipment.⁶⁵ In February 2017, for example, Russia ordered snap exercises involving 45,000 troops, 150 aircraft, and 200 anti-aircraft pieces.⁶⁶ 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."⁶⁷

Snap exercises have been used for military campaigns as well. According to General Curtis M. Scaparrotti, former EUCOM Commander and NATO Supreme Allied Commander

Europe, for example, “the annexation of Crimea took place in connection with a snap exercise by Russia.”⁶⁸ Such 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.”⁶⁹

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.⁷⁰ 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 75,000–100,000.⁷¹ 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.⁷²

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.⁷³ Chinese participation was a significant change from past iterations of VOSTOK, although 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.⁷⁴

Threats to the Homeland

Russia is the only state adversary in the Europe 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 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.⁷⁵

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.”⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷

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 as well as the capability 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.⁷⁸ 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.”⁷⁹

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.⁸⁰ This arsenal serves both as a deterrent to large-scale attack and as a protective umbrella under which Russia can modernize its conventional forces at a deliberate pace, but 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.⁸¹

General Wolters discussed the risks presented by Russia’s possible use of tactical nuclear weapons in his 2020 EUCOM posture statement:

Russia’s vast non-strategic nuclear weapons stockpile and apparent misperception they could gain advantage in crisis or conflict through its use is concerning. Russia continues to engage in disruptive behavior despite widespread international disapproval and continued economic sanctions, and continues to challenge the rules-based international order and violate its obligations under international agreements. The Kremlin

employs coercion and aggressive actions amid growing signs of domestic unrest. These actions suggest Russian leadership may feel compelled to take greater risks to maintain power, counter Western influence, and seize opportunities to demonstrate a perception of great power status.⁸²

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.⁸³ 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.⁸⁴ 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.

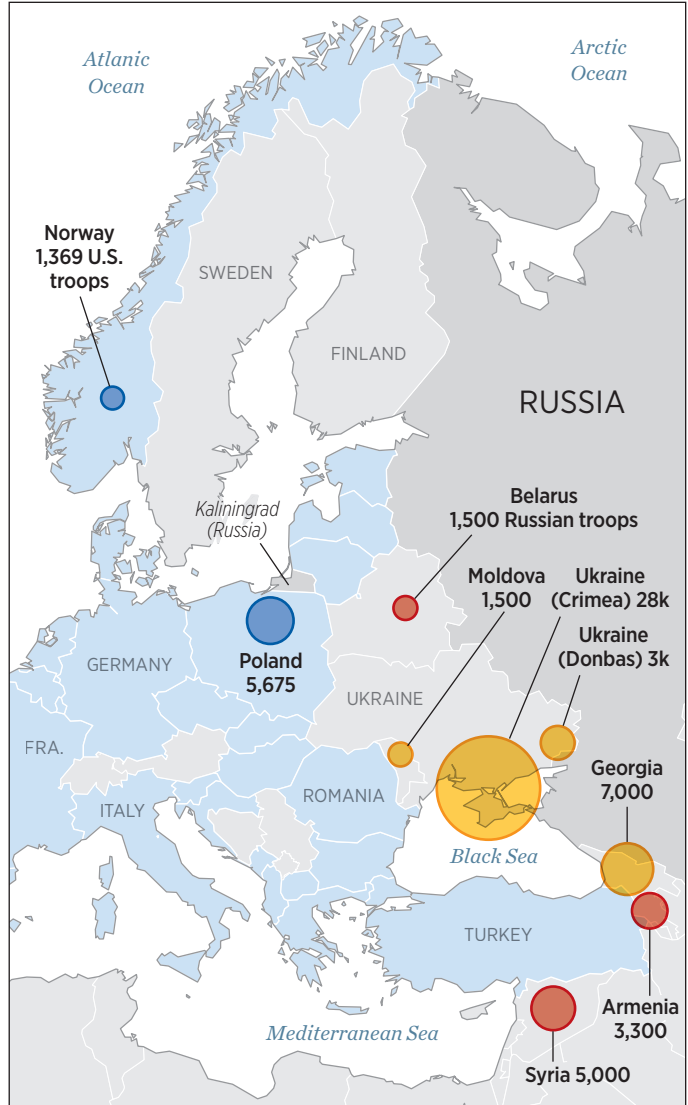
Russia continues to violate the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which bans the testing, production, and possession of intermediate-range missiles.⁸⁵ Russia first violated the treaty in 2008 and then systematically escalated its violations, moving from testing to producing to deploying the prohibited missile into the field. Russia fully deployed the SSC-X-8 cruise missile in violation of the INF Treaty early in 2017 and has deployed battalions with the 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.⁸⁶ U.S. officials consider

U.S. Troops Greatly Outnumbered Near Russian Border

U.S. troops in Norway and Poland number about 7,000—far less than the 49,300 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

SOURCES: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2020: The Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics* (London: Routledge, 2020); Defense Manpower Data Center, March 2019; and Heritage Foundation research.



the banned cruise missiles to be fully operational.⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸ The U.S. provided its six-month notice of withdrawal from the INF treaty on February 2, 2019, and officially withdrew from the treaty on August 2.⁸⁹

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 Moscow’s military and political thinking and the level of Russia’s aggressive behavior beyond its borders.

Threat of Regional War

Many U.S. allies regard Russia as a genuine threat. At times, this threat is of a military

nature. At other times, it involves less conventional tactics such as cyberattacks, utilization of energy resources, and propaganda. Today, as in Imperial times, Russia uses both the pen and the sword to exert its influence. 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.

Russia also uses espionage 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."⁹⁰ In October 2019, the U.S. released and deported to Russia Maria Butina, a convicted Russian operative who had infiltrated American conservative political groups to interfere with the 2016 presidential election.⁹¹ 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.⁹²

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.⁹³ 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.⁹⁴ On March 15, 2018, 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."⁹⁵ U.S. intelligence officials

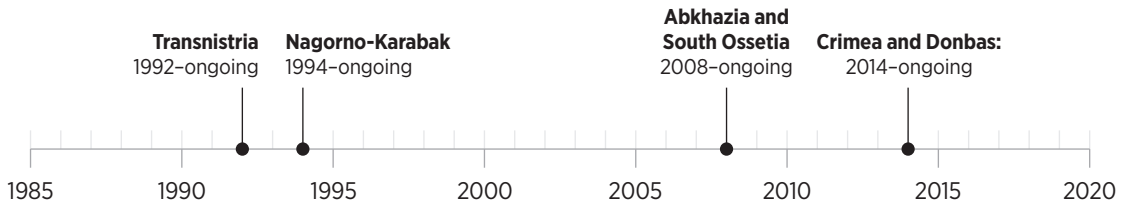
have reportedly linked Russia to the deaths of 14 people in the U.K. alone, many of them Russians who ran afoul of the Kremlin.⁹⁶

Russian intelligence operatives are reportedly mapping U.S. telecommunications infrastructure around the United States, focusing especially on fiber-optic cables.⁹⁷ 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.⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹

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.¹⁰⁰ In November 2017, the Russian-built "counter-drug" center at Las Colinas opened, with its future purpose being to support "Russian security engagement with the entire region."¹⁰¹ According to a Foreign Policy Research Institute report, "Aside from the center, Russian forces have participated in joint raids and operations against drug trafficking [in Nicaragua], capturing as many as 41 presumed traffickers in one particular operation" since 2017.¹⁰² Russia also has an agreement with Nicaragua, signed in 2015, that allows access to Nicaraguan ports for its naval vessels.¹⁰³

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*

Russian Interference Zones



Transnistria
Russia has stationed troops in Transnistria since 1992 when a cease-fire ended the Moldovan civil war.

Nagorno-Karabakh
The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan came to a head in 1994, when a Russian-brokered ceasefire was signed. Since then, occasional conflicts still occur in the region, which rightfully belongs to Azerbaijan.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia
Since Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia and the subsequent five-day war, Russian troops have been stationed in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Crimea
In March 2014, Russia illegally annexed the entire Crimean peninsula, and Russian troops have been stationed there ever since.

Donbas
Russia's annexation of Crimea led to an armed conflict between Russian troops, Russian-backed separatist forces, and Ukrainian soldiers in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region.

SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

heritage.org

Security and Estonia 2019 report states clearly that “[t]he 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.”¹⁰⁴

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.

According to Lithuania’s *National Threat Assessment 2020*, the “main threat to Lithuania’s national security is Russia’s foreign and security policies driven by the Kremlin’s desire to ensure the regime’s stability and demonstrate its indispensability to [a] domestic audience.”¹⁰⁵ Its *National Threat Assessment 2019* states that Russia “exploits democratic freedoms and rights for its subversive activity” and “actually promotes its aggressive foreign policy” while “pretending to develop cultural relations” in Lithuania.¹⁰⁶ 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”; and the use of “compatriot support funds and other compatriot policy bodies” targeted at Latvian youth.¹⁰⁷

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.”¹⁰⁸ 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.”¹⁰⁹

In 2020, Russia used the COVID-19 pandemic to spread disinformation. For example, in March, various Russian state news sources reported that the U.S. initiated the coronavirus pandemic, that the U.S. deployed the virus as a “biological weapon,” or that the virus was a complete hoax created by the United States. Russia did not create this disinformation on its own; it relied on various theories created by China and Iran.¹¹⁰

In addition, Russia has sought to use disinformation to undermine NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in the Baltics. In April 2017, for example, Russian hackers planted a false story about U.S. troops being poisoned by mustard gas in Latvia on the Baltic News Service website.¹¹¹ 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.¹¹² And U.K. forces in Estonia have been targeted with a fake news story about British troops harassing an elderly Estonian at a hospital.¹¹³

U.S. troops stationed in Poland for NATO’s eFP have been the target of similar Russian disinformation campaigns.¹¹⁴ A fake story that a U.S. Army vehicle had hit and killed a Lithuanian boy in June during Saber Strike 2018 was meant to undermine public support for NATO exercises.¹¹⁵ 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.”¹¹⁶ In particular, recent Russian propaganda has focused on portraying eFP as an “occupying force.”¹¹⁷

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.¹¹⁸

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.¹¹⁹ 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 fully completed in 2023.¹²⁰ 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.¹²¹ In December 2019, Russia completed a new rail bridge over the Kerch Strait that the EU condemned as “yet another step toward a forced integration of the illegally annexed peninsula.”¹²²

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.¹²³ Deployment of the Monolit-B radar system, for instance, which has a passive range of 450 kilometers, “provides the Russian military with an excellent real-time picture of the positions of foreign surface vessels operating in the Black Sea.”¹²⁴ 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.¹²⁵ In March 2019, Russia announced the deployment of nuclear-capable Tupolev Tu-22M3 strategic bombers to Gvardeyskoye air base in occupied Crimea.¹²⁶

Control of Crimea has allowed Russia to use the Black Sea as a platform to launch and support naval operations in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹²⁷ The Black Sea fleet has received six *Kilo* diesel submarines and three *Admiral*

Grigovich-class frigates equipped with Kalibr-NK long-range cruise missiles.¹²⁸ Russia is also planning to add *Gorshkov*-class frigates to its Black Sea fleet.¹²⁹ Kalibr cruise missiles have a range of at least 2,500 kilometers, which places cities from Rome to Vilnius within range of Black Sea-based cruise missiles.¹³⁰

Russia has deployed five S-400 air defense systems with a potential range of around 250 miles to Crimea.¹³¹ 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.”¹³² 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.”¹³³

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. Moscow 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. Approximately 3,000 Russian soldiers are operating in Ukraine.¹³⁴ Russian-backed separatists daily violate the September 2014 Minsk I and February 2015 Minsk II cease-fire agreements.¹³⁵ These agreements have led to the de facto partition of Ukraine and have created a frozen conflict that remains both deadly and advantageous for Russia. As of February 2019, the war in Ukraine had cost 13,000 lives and had left 30,000 people wounded.¹³⁶

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.¹³⁷ In September 2019, Russia released the sailors in a prisoner swap with Ukraine.¹³⁸ Russian harassment of ships sailing through the Kerch

Strait and impeding of free movement had taken place consistently before the November 2018 aggression and continued afterwards.¹³⁹ Russian inspections of ships, blockages of the strait, and delays have coalesced to constrict the port of Mariupol, where shipping traffic has been greatly reduced since 2014.¹⁴⁰

In Moldova, Russia supports the breakaway enclave of Transnistria, where yet another frozen conflict festers to Moscow's liking. According to a Congressional Research Service report:

Russia stations approximately 1,500 soldiers in Transnistria, a few hundred of which Moldova accepts as peacekeepers. In 2017, the Constitutional Court ruled that Russia's troop presence in Moldova was unconstitutional, and parliament adopted a declaration calling on Russia to withdraw. In 2018, the U.N. General Assembly passed a resolution calling on Russia to withdraw its troops from Moldova "unconditionally and without further delay."

A political settlement to the Transnistrian conflict appears distant. The Moldovan government supports a special local governance status for Transnistria, but Russia and authorities in Transnistria have resisted agreement.

The conflict-resolution process operates in a "5+2" format under the chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), with the OSCE, Russia, and Ukraine as mediators and the EU and the United States as observers. The EU also supports conflict management through a Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM). EUBAM seeks to help the two countries combat transborder crime, facilitate trade, and resolve the conflict over Transnistria, which shares a long border with Ukraine.¹⁴¹

Russia continues to occupy 12 percent of Moldova's territory. In August 2018, Russian

and separatist forces equipped with armored personnel carriers 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) Mission to Moldova "expresse[d] its concern."¹⁴² 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.¹⁴³

Russia's permanent stationing of Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad in 2018 occurred a year to the day after NATO's eFP deployed to Lithuania.¹⁴⁴ Russia reportedly has deployed tactical nuclear weapons, the S-400 air defense system, and P-800 anti-ship cruise missiles to Kaliningrad.¹⁴⁵ 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.¹⁴⁶ According to the IISS, the majority of Russian air force pilot graduates this past year were sent to Kaliningrad "to improve staffing" in the air force units located there.¹⁴⁷

Russia also has outfitted a missile brigade in Luga, Russia, a mere 74 miles from the Estonian city of Narva, with Iskander missiles.¹⁴⁸ 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.¹⁴⁹

Nor is Russia deploying missiles only in Europe. In November 2016, Russia announced that it had stationed Bal and Bastion missile systems on the Kuril Islands of Iturup and Kunashir, which are also claimed by Japan.¹⁵⁰ In February 2018, Russia approved the deployment of warplanes to an airport on Iturup, one of the largest islands.¹⁵¹ In September 2019, Russia announced its plans to deploy additional missile systems on Paramushir and Matua, two islands in the northern portion of the

chain.¹⁵² 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.¹⁵³

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.”¹⁵⁴ In January 2017, Russia’s Ministry of Defence announced that four S-400 air defense systems would be deployed to the Western Military District.¹⁵⁵ According to a report published by the Royal Institute of International Affairs:

Five dedicated storage and maintenance bases have been established in the Western Military District, and another one in the Southern Military District (and a further 15 in the Central and Eastern districts). These, similar to the US Army’s POMCUS (Prepositioning Of Materiel Configured in Unit Sets), contain pre-positioned, properly maintained brigade-level assets, and 2.5 units of fire for all equipments.¹⁵⁶

Russia represents a real and potentially existential threat to NATO member countries in Eastern and Central Europe. Considering Russia’s aggression in Georgia and Ukraine, a conventional attack against a NATO member, while unlikely, cannot be ruled out entirely. In all likelihood, Russia will continue to use nonlinear means in an effort to pressure and undermine both these nations and the NATO alliance.

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.”¹⁵⁷

Russia’s Arctic territory is included within this FSB-controlled border zone. The FSB and its subordinate coast guard have added patrol vessels and have built up Arctic bases, including a coast guard base in Murmansk that was opened in December 2018.¹⁵⁸

The Russian National Guard, which reports to President Putin,¹⁵⁹ is likewise 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 was opened in December 2017.¹⁶⁰ The first shipment of LNG from the Sabetta terminal to China via the NSR took place in July 2018.¹⁶¹ On August 23, 2019, the Russian National Guard set out on the *Akademik Lomonosov*, a floating nuclear power plant, on its way to Pevek. The voyage occurred after a year of preparations in Murmansk.¹⁶²

In May 2018, Putin issued a presidential decree setting a target of 80 million tons shipped across the NSR by 2024.¹⁶³ In 2018, only 18 million tons were shipped across the route, but in the first nine months of 2019, shipments increased by 40 percent to 23.37 million tons.¹⁶⁴ To facilitate the achievement of Putin’s 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.¹⁶⁵ 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.”¹⁶⁶

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.¹⁶⁷ 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.¹⁶⁸ "Russian Arctic troops," however, "have experienced a number of setbacks of late," and plans for the Arctic Coastal Defense divisions "seem to have been shelved for now."¹⁶⁹ A naval deep-water division, based in Gadzhiyevo in the Murmansk region and directly subordinate to the Minister of Defense, was established in January 2018.¹⁷⁰

Russia also has been 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.¹⁷¹ In addition, old Soviet-era facilities have been reopened. The airfield on Kotelny Island, for example, was reactivated in 2013 for the first time in 20 years and scheduled to "be manned by 250 personnel."¹⁷² According to a Center for Strategic and International Studies report, Kotelny Island is equipped with air defense systems such as the Bastion-P and Pantsir-S1, which "create a complex, layered coastal defense arrangement."¹⁷³

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.¹⁷⁴ 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.¹⁷⁵

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.¹⁷⁶ 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."¹⁷⁷ 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."¹⁷⁸

Russia resumed regular fighter jet combat patrols in the Arctic in 2019.¹⁷⁹ As an example, the Ministry of Defense announced that in January 2019, two Tu-160 bombers flew for 15 hours in international airspace over the Arctic.¹⁸⁰ 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.¹⁸¹

Russian Arctic flights are often aggressive. 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.¹⁸² 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.¹⁸³ In March 2020, two Russian strategic heavy bombers flew over U.S. submarines surfaced in the Arctic Ocean, and in April, two maritime Tu-142 reconnaissance and anti-submarine warfare planes flew over the Barents, Norwegian, and North Seas.¹⁸⁴

The 45th Air Force and Air Defense Army of the Northern Fleet was formed in December 2015, and "[r]adio-radar units and an air defense missile regiment equipped with S-300 missile systems were put on combat duty on the Franz Joseph Land, Novaya Zemlya, Severnaya Zemlya and New Siberian Islands archipelagos."¹⁸⁵ In 2017, Russia activated a new radar complex on Wrangel Island.¹⁸⁶ In 2019, it announced 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,¹⁸⁷ but the status of this effort is currently unknown.

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.¹⁸⁸

Russia's ultimate goal was to have a combined Russian armed force deployed in the Arctic by 2020,¹⁸⁹ but it appears that Moscow is still working on this. For a few years, Russia was developing three new nuclear icebreakers, and in May 2019, it launched its third and final Arktika nuclear icebreaker.¹⁹⁰ In October 2019, Russia launched "a new combat icebreaking vessel," the *Ivan Papanin*, which is designed to act also as a tugboat and patrol ship.¹⁹¹ The *Ivan Papanin* is the first in a fleet of icebreaking corvettes that Russia is currently developing.¹⁹²

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."¹⁹³ In May 2017, Russia had announced that its buildup of the Northern Fleet's nuclear capacity is intended "to phase 'NATO out of [the] Arctic.'"¹⁹⁴

Russia's Northern Fleet is also building newly refitted submarines, including a newly converted *Belgorod* nuclear-powered submarine that was launched in April 2019.¹⁹⁵ The *Belgorod* is expected to carry six Poseidon drones, also known as nuclear torpedoes, and will carry out "covert missions."¹⁹⁶ The submarine will have a smaller mini-sub that will potentially be capable of tampering with or destroying undersea telecommunications cables.¹⁹⁷ 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."¹⁹⁸ A similar submarine, the *Khabarovsk*, is under construction and was expected to be launched as early as June 2020.¹⁹⁹

Russia continues to develop and increase its military capabilities in the Arctic region. The likelihood of armed conflict remains low, but physical changes in the region mean that the posture of players will continue to evolve. It is clear that Russia intends to exert a dominant

influence. As summarized in EUCOM's 2018 posture statement:

In the Arctic, Russia is revitalizing its northern fleet and building or renovating military bases along their Arctic coast line in anticipation of increased military and commercial activity. Russia also intends to assert sovereignty over the Northern Sea route in violation of the provisions of the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Although the chances of military conflict in the Arctic are low in the near-term, Russia is increasing its qualitative advantage in Arctic operations, and its military bases will serve to reinforce Russia's position with the threat of force.²⁰⁰

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 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.²⁰¹ The Georgian

Foreign Ministry criticized the treaties as a step toward “annexation of Georgia’s occupied territories,”²⁰² 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.²⁰³ In November 2017, the U.S. State Department approved an estimated \$75 million sale of Javelin missiles to Georgia, and in June 2018, the State Department approved a sale of Stinger missiles.²⁰⁴ 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”).²⁰⁵ In May 2020, the U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi revealed that Russian-led security forces were continuing to erect unauthorized fences and reinforcing existing illegal “borderization” efforts near a number of Georgian villages.²⁰⁶

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 2044.²⁰⁷ The bulk of Russia’s forces, consisting of 3,300 soldiers, dozens of fighter planes and attack helicopters, 74 T-72 tanks, almost 200 APCs, and an S-300 air defense system, are based around the 102nd Military Base.²⁰⁸ 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.²⁰⁹ Armenian troops have even deployed alongside Russian troops in Syria to the dismay of U.S. policymakers.²¹⁰

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.²¹¹ 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.²¹² In the early summer of 2018, Azerbaijani forces successfully launched an operation to retake territory around Günnüt, a small village strategically located in the mountainous region of Azerbaijan’s Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic.²¹³ The 2016 and 2018 incidents marked the only changes in territory since 1994.²¹⁴

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.²¹⁵ As noted by Eurasia expert Eduard Abrahamyan, “for years, Moscow has periodically sought to use the local authorities in Karabakh as a proxy tool of coercive diplomacy against both Baku and Yerevan.”²¹⁶

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. 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.

Increased Activity in the Mediterranean. Russia has had a military presence in Syria for decades, but 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. Although conflicting strategic interests cause the relationship between Assad and Putin to be strained at times, Assad still needs Russian military support to take back Idlib province, a goal that he likely shares with Putin.²¹⁷ Russia's Hmeymim Air Base is located close to Idlib, a source of attacks from rebel fighters and terrorist groups, and Moscow instinctively desires to protect its assets. Assad's only goal is to restore sovereignty over all of Syria; Russia generally is more focused on eliminating terrorism in the region and must manage its relationship with Turkey.

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." In December 2019, it was announced that "Russia will invest \$500m in the port of Tartus in its largest ever investment in Syria."²¹⁸ According to a May 2020 report, Russia is reinforcing its naval group in the Mediterranean Sea with warships and submarines armed with Kalibr cruise missiles.²¹⁹

The agreement with Syria also includes upgrades to the Hmeymim air base at Latakia, including repairs to a second runway.²²⁰ Russia deployed the S-400 anti-aircraft missile system to Hmeymim in late 2015.²²¹ 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."²²² 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.²²³

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."²²⁴ The IISS similarly reports that Russia has used Syria as "a test bed for the development of joint operations and new weapons and tactics."²²⁵ In fact, 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.²²⁶

Overall, Russian arms sales abroad reportedly topped \$13 billion in 2019, exceeding sales in 2018 by more than \$2 billion.²²⁷

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-10.²²⁸ 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."²²⁹ 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."²³⁰

In October 2018, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi signed a strategic cooperation treaty with Russia.²³¹ 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.²³² Russia is a major exporter of arms to Egypt, which agreed to purchase 20 Su-35 fighter jets in 2018 for \$2 billion.²³³ Production of the Su-35 jets began in May 2020.²³⁴

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.²³⁵ Despite its ties to Haftar, Russia has also focused on growing business ties with the Libyan government in Tripoli.²³⁶

Russia has stepped up its military operations in the Mediterranean significantly, often harassing U.S. and allied vessels taking part in operations against the Islamic State. In April 2020, for example, a U.S. Navy aircraft over the Mediterranean Sea was intercepted by a Russian Su-35 jet—the second time in four days that “Russian pilots made unsafe maneuvers while intercepting US aircraft.”²³⁷ The Russian jet had taken off from Hmeymim air base in Syria. This happened again in May when two Russian Su-35 jets unsafely intercepted a U.S. Navy P-8A maritime patrol aircraft over international waters in the Eastern Mediterranean.²³⁸

From April–August 2017, 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. 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.²³⁹ 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.²⁴⁰

Russia's position in Syria, including its expanded area-access/area-denial capabilities and increased warship and submarine presence, underscores the growing importance of the Mediterranean theater in ensuring Europe's security.

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.²⁴¹

Senior members of the Russian government have alleged that NATO enlargement in the Balkans is one of the biggest threats to Russia.²⁴² 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. In May 2019, two Russian nationals believed to be the masterminds behind the plot were convicted in absentia 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.”²⁴³

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.”²⁴⁴

North Macedonia’s accession to NATO was similarly targeted by Russia, which had warned the nation against joining the alliance and sought to derail the Prespa agreement that paved the way for membership by settling long-standing Greek objections to Macedonia’s name.²⁴⁵ In 2018, after North Macedonia was invited to join NATO, Russia’s ambassador to the EU stated that “there are errors that have consequences.”²⁴⁶ 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 protestors as well as politicians and organizations opposing the agreement.²⁴⁷

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 [2017], 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.²⁴⁸

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.”²⁴⁹

In February 2020, Serbia purchased the Pantsir S1 air-defense system from Russia, despite objections and potential sanctions from the United States.²⁵⁰ To increase its role in Serbia, Russia has used its cultural ties, positioning itself as the defender of orthodoxy and investing funds in the refurbishing of orthodox churches. It also has helped to establish more than 100 pro-Russian non-governmental organizations and media outlets in Macedonia.²⁵¹

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.²⁵²

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. In October 2019, Serbia did sign a trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic

Union after the EU had warned against doing so.²⁵³ In addition, 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.²⁵⁴

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."²⁵⁵ 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 current unofficial leader, Milorad Dodik, has long advocated independence for the region and has enjoyed a very close relationship with the Kremlin. President Željka Cvijanović also claims that Republika Srpska will continue to maintain its partnership with Russia.²⁵⁶ 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 and 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."²⁵⁷

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. 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.²⁵⁸ In October 2018, just days before elections, Dodik again visited Russia where he watched the Russian Grand Prix in a VIP box with Putin.²⁵⁹ 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.²⁶⁰

On January 9, 2020, Bosnian Serbs again held "statehood day."²⁶¹ At the 2018 "statehood day," then-president Dodik and the self-proclaimed leaders of South Ossetia had "signed a memorandum on cooperation between the 'states.'"²⁶² Russia has reportedly trained a Republika Srpska paramilitary force in Russia at the nearby Niš air base 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."²⁶³ Veterans organizations in Russia and Republika Srpska have developed close ties.²⁶⁴

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. On April 4, 2018, the Republika Srpska authorities opened a new \$4 million training center "at the site of a former army barracks in Zaluzani, outside Banja Luka." The site serves as the headquarters for "anti-terrorist units, logistics units, and a department to combat organized crime."²⁶⁵

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."²⁶⁶

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.

The foremost external threat to the Balkans is Russia. Russia's interests in the Balkans are at odds with the U.S. goal of encouraging the region to progress toward the transatlantic community. Russia seeks to sever the transatlantic bond forged with the Western Balkans by sowing instability and increasing its economic, political, and military footprint in the region.

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."²⁶⁷ In April 2018, a fully armed Russian jet buzzed a French frigate operating in the eastern Mediterranean.²⁶⁸

Russian threats to the maritime theater also include activity near undersea fiber-optic cables. In July 2019, a Russian submarine reportedly was trying to tap information flowing through undersea cables near Russia's northern shore in the Barents Sea. The cables "carry 95 percent of daily worldwide communications" in addition to "financial transactions worth over \$10 trillion a day."²⁶⁹ Thus, any disruption would cause a catastrophic reduction in the flow of capital.

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.²⁷⁰ 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 2018.²⁷¹

Airspace. Russia has continued its provocative military flights near U.S. and European airspace over the past year. In April 2020, a U.S. Navy P-8A Poseidon reconnaissance aircraft was intercepted twice by a Russian Air Force Su-35 Flanker-E in international airspace over the Mediterranean Sea. This was the second unsafe intercept between a P-8A Poseidon and Russian fighter over the Mediterranean. In March 2020, American and Canadian fighter jets intercepted two Russian Tu-142 aircraft that had entered the Alaskan Air Defense Identification Zone.²⁷² Also in March, two Russian Tu-95 Bear strategic bomber aircraft entered Irish-controlled airspace. British Royal Air Force fighters, as well as Norwegian and French quick-reaction aircraft, scrambled to intercept them.²⁷³

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.²⁷⁴ Also in March 2019, Italian jets operating from Keflavik in Iceland intercepted two Russian Tu-142 Bear bombers flying in Iceland's air surveillance area.²⁷⁵

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.²⁷⁶

Russian flights have also targeted U.S. ally Japan. Twice in one day in June 2019, two Russian Tupolev Tu-95 bombers entered Japanese airspace—over Minamidaito Island east of Okinawa and over Hachijo Island southeast of Tokyo. Japan sent out fighter jets to warn them.²⁷⁷ 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.²⁷⁸ 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.²⁷⁹ 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 was necessary in the preceding year.²⁸⁰

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, “NATO fighters scrambled 130 times in 2017, and 85 Alpha Scrambles had been mounted by mid-November 2018” in response “to provocative Russian air force flights.”²⁸¹ The situation remained the same in 2019. In May 2020, Russian Su-27 and Su-30 fighter jets intercepted two U.S. B-1B supersonic heavy bombers over international waters of the Black and Baltic Seas.²⁸² Also in May, NATO jets were scrambled to intercept two Russian Tu-22 bombers that were approaching Romanian airspace.²⁸³ In April 2020, NATO jets scrambled to intercept two Russian fighter jets that were flying over a U.S. Navy destroyer in the Baltic Sea near Lithuania.²⁸⁴

In addition, there have been several incidents involving Russian military aircraft flying in Europe without using their transponders. In April 2020, two maritime Tu-142 reconnaissance and anti-submarine warfare planes flew over the Barents, Norwegian, and North Seas but had switched off their transponders. As a result, two Norwegian F-16s were scrambled to identify the planes.²⁸⁵ In September 2019, a Russian Air Force Sukhoi Su-34 fighter flew over Estonian airspace without filing a flight plan or keeping radio contact with Estonian air navigation officials because the plane's transponder had been switched off. This was the second air violation of Estonia's airspace by a Russian aircraft in 2019.²⁸⁶ In August 2019, two Russian Su-27 escort jets flew over the Baltic Sea without a flight plan and without turning on their transponders.²⁸⁷

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, Russia's antagonistic behavior in international waters is a threat to freedom of the seas.

Russia's reckless aerial activity in the region also remains a threat to civilian aircraft flying in European airspace. That the provocative and hazardous behavior of the Russian armed forces or Russian-sponsored groups poses a threat to civilian aircraft in Europe was amply demonstrated by the July 2014 downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17, killing all 283 passengers and 15 crewmembers, over the skies of southeastern Ukraine.

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, “a victory in information warfare ‘can be 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.”²⁸⁸

Russia continues to probe U.S. critical infrastructure. In January 2019, testifying before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, then-Director of National Intelligence Daniel R. Coats assessed that:

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.²⁸⁹

Russia continued to conduct cyberattacks on government and private entities in 2019. In January, “hackers associated with the Russian intelligence services were found to have hacked the Center for Strategic and International Studies,” and “[t]he U.S. Democratic National Committee revealed that it had been targeted by Russian hackers in the weeks after the 2018 midterm elections.”²⁹⁰

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.”²⁹¹ 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.²⁹²

Nor is the United States Russia’s only target. In February 2020, the U.S. and its key allies accused Russia’s main military intelligence agency, the GRU, of a broad cyberattack against the Republic of Georgia. According to *The New York Times*, the attack “took out websites and interrupted television broadcasts.”²⁹³ The attack was limited, but through its accusation, the U.S. sought to deter Moscow from intervening in the 2020 presidential election. 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 its 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.”²⁹⁴

Russia’s cyber capabilities are advanced and are a key tool in realizing the state’s strategic aims. Russia has used cyberattacks to further the reach and effectiveness of its propaganda and disinformation campaigns, and its ongoing cyberattacks against election processes in the U.S. and European countries are 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 cyberattacks 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 serious challenge both to the U.S. and to U.S. interests abroad.

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.²⁹⁵

For these reasons, the *Index of U.S. Military Strength* continues to assess the threat from Russia as “aggressive” for level of provocation of behavior and “formidable” for level of capability.

Threats: Russia

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

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