

Russia

The Heritage Defense Team

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched its second invasion of Ukraine. Employing a force of nearly 200,000 troops replete with armor, rocket and conventional artillery, and combat aircraft, President Vladimir Putin ordered a “special military operation” to seize Ukraine, destabilize if not overthrow its government, and neutralize its military. Contrary to the expectations of many, however, Russia failed to win a quick victory and is now mired in an ongoing war with no prospect of complete victory. In addition to the tremendous losses borne by both sides, the war has depleted the military inventories of Western countries that continue to provide material support to Ukraine.

The assault on Ukraine is irrefutable proof that Putin’s Russia is a profound threat to the U.S., its interests, and the security and economic interests of its allies, particularly in Europe but also more broadly given the reach of Russia’s military and the destructive ripple effect its use is having across countries and regions of special importance to the United States. Today, Ukraine is in ruins, the war continues (thus illustrating the expanse of Russia’s military inventory), and Putin’s anger with Europe has intensified because Europe’s aid to Ukraine has prevented a Russian victory.

From the Arctic to the Baltics, Ukraine, and the South Caucasus, and increasingly in the Mediterranean, Russia continues to foment instability in Europe. Despite its economic problems and its losses in Ukraine, Russia continues to prioritize 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 unabated.

Destruction of the Nordstream 1 and 2 pipelines and Europe’s transition away from Russian energy

sources have seriously degraded Russia’s energy position in Europe. Nevertheless, Russia continues to use energy along with espionage, cyberattacks, and information warfare to exploit vulnerabilities in an effort to divide the transatlantic alliance and undermine faith in government and societal institutions. Russia’s losses in energy sales to Europe have been mitigated by higher prices for energy in general throughout 2023 and increases in sales to non-European countries including India and China.

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

Military Capabilities. Assessing the state of Russia’s conventional military capabilities is unusually challenging because of the war in Ukraine, Russian efforts to mobilize additional manpower, and Russia’s efforts to bring armaments formerly in storage into frontline service. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS):

- Among the key weapons in Russia’s inventory are 339 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs); 1,800 main battle tanks; 4,150 armored infantry fighting vehicles; more than 5,350 armored personnel carriers; and more than 4,458 pieces of artillery.
- The navy has one aircraft carrier (undergoing extensive refit); 51 submarines (including 11 ballistic missile submarines); three cruisers; 11 destroyers; 16 frigates; and 128 patrol and coastal combatants.

- The air force has 1,153 combat-capable aircraft.
- The army has approximately 550,000 soldiers, including 100,000 conscripts.
- There is a total reserve force of 1,500,000 for all armed forces.¹

Russia's failure to take Kyiv in the early stages of its second invasion led to significant losses among its best forces. For example, casualty rates among some Russian Spetsnaz units reportedly have reached 90 percent–95 percent.² Russia also has suffered significant losses of tanks and other military hardware as a result of its assault on Ukraine but can be expected to rebuild its military and replace the destroyed tanks and other equipment with newly developed modern versions, not the old Soviet hardware. According to one recent analysis:

The Russian military has recognized its subpar performance and in January Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov responded with another round of reforms. Under his new plan, an army corps will be added in Karelia, on Finland's border, to counter the country's entry into NATO. The Gerasimov reforms will also see the re-establishment of two military districts—Moscow and St. Petersburg—which were merged in 2010 to become part of the Western Military District. Gerasimov also said Russia would add three motorized rifle divisions in Ukraine as part of combined arms formations in the occupied Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions.³

In recent years, Russia has increasingly deployed paid private volunteer troops trained at Special Forces bases and often under the command of Russian Special Forces in order to avoid political blowback from military deaths abroad. It has used such volunteers in Libya, Syria, and Ukraine because they help the Kremlin to “keep costs low and maintain a degree of deniability,” and “[a]ny personnel losses [can] be shrouded from unauthorized disclosure.”⁴ The most infamous such mercenary unit, the Wagner Group, now numbers as many as 50,000 fighters, but 80 percent (40,000) of its forces used in Ukraine are reportedly drawn from prisons, and they have taken heavy casualties.⁵

In July 2016, Putin signed a law creating a National Guard (Rosgvardia) with a total strength, both civilian and military, of 340,000 controlled directly by him.⁶ He created this force, which is purportedly 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.”⁷

Rosgvardia has been involved in the war in Ukraine. In March 2022, Rosgvardia Director Viktor Zolotov stated that “National Guard units are not only involved in the fight against [the so-called Ukrainian] nationalists, [but] also fight to ensure public order and security in liberated localities, guard important strategic facilities, [and] protect humanitarian aid convoys.” Specifically, Rosgvardia was sent to seize control of various Ukrainian cities.⁸ Putin's signature on a March 27, 2023, decree removing the upper age limit for National Guard members serving in parts of Ukraine is a telling indicator of heavy Russian casualties and the unreliability of some Guard units.⁹

The Russian economy rebounded during the latter part of the COVID-19 pandemic,¹⁰ but after Moscow invaded Ukraine again in February 2022, Western sanctions had a significant effect on the economy.¹¹ A surge in energy prices helped to cushion the Russian economy from the worst effects of the sanctions, but the World Bank expects the Russian economy to have contracted by 4.5 percent in 2022 and to continue contracting in 2023 with inflation remaining high. The long-term outlook for Russia's economy is bleak, as restrictions on the import of Western technology hamper productivity growth.¹² The economic recession could affect Russia's ability to fund its military operations and will make the long-run choice between guns and butter increasingly stark. Nevertheless, it would be unwise to underrate Russia's ability to find ways to continue to sustain and rebuild its military power, even if by ever more hand-to-mouth methods.

In 2022, Russia spent \$86.4 billion on its military—9.2 percent more than it spent in 2020–2021—and remained one of the world's top five nations in terms of defense spending.¹³ Much of Russia's military expenditure has purportedly been directed toward modernization of its armed forces, but their poor performance in Ukraine indicates that at least some of this expenditure was wasted, stolen,

or poorly used. The U.S. Intelligence Community notes that Russia “retains the ability to deploy naval, long-range bomber, and small general purpose air and ground forces globally” but that heavy losses in Ukraine “and the large-scale expenditures of precision-guided munitions during the conflict have degraded Moscow’s ground and air-based conventional capabilities and increased its reliance on nuclear weapons.”¹⁴

From 2010 to 2019 (the most recent year for which data are publicly available), close to 40 percent of Russia’s total military spending was on arms procurement.¹⁵ Russia spent 4.1 percent of its GDP on defense in 2022, a significant increase from 2021’s 3.7 percent.¹⁶ This is likely to increase as combat losses and consumption of war matériel in Ukraine continue to mount.

In early 2018, Russia introduced its new State Armament Program 2018–2027, a \$306 billion investment in new equipment and force modernization. According to the IISS, the program continues its predecessor’s emphasis on modernization, but some of its aims are more modest than they were.¹⁷ The extent to which modernization efforts are affected by the Russo–Ukraine war cannot yet be known, but while the war will increase Russia’s need to replace destroyed forces with modernized equipment, it will also reduce Russia’s ability, both financially and technologically, to make the necessary investments. Defense expenditures and investments in modernization programs are likely to remain high, especially as they are enabled by historically high energy revenues, but Russia’s ability to rebuild after the war will be challenged, though certainly not eliminated.

Russia has prioritized modernization of its nuclear capabilities and in 2021 claimed that its nuclear trifecta was more than 89 percent of the way through its modernization from the Soviet era.¹⁸ However, by the end of 2022, modernization had reached only 91 percent of the arsenal.¹⁹

Russia has been planning to deploy the RS-28 (Satan 2) ICBM as a replacement for the RS-36, which is being phased out in the 2020s.²⁰ In June 2022, Putin announced that the missile had been “successfully tested” and, “with nuclear capability, will be deployed by the end of 2022.” Alexei Zhuravlyov, a member of the Russian State Duma, boasted “that the [RS-28] would reduce the United States to ‘nuclear ashes’ if they ‘think Russia should

not exist.”²¹ Russia was able to carry out only one test of the RS-28 in 2022, but in spite of “myriad problems,” the missile is reportedly in operational production.²²

In April 2020, the Kremlin stated that it had begun state trials for its T-14 Armata main battle tank in Syria.²³ After a series of delays, Russian troops allegedly will receive more than 40 Armata tanks in 2023.²⁴ The T-14 reportedly debuted in Ukraine in April 2023, but according to British military intelligence, the initial tranche of T-14s were in poor condition, and their deployment in Ukraine was primarily for propaganda purposes.²⁵ There are serious doubts that the T-14 will ever be produced in significant numbers.²⁶ Aside from the T-14 Armata, Russia has reportedly stepped up production of its T-90M and T-72B3 tanks, although the IISS reports that at the end of 2022, only 100 T-90Ms and 250 T-72B3s had been deployed, and the Oryx database of Russian equipment destroyed in Ukraine reports that 19 T-90Ms and 303 T-72B3s were destroyed or abandoned.²⁷

Russia’s fifth-generation Su-27 fighter has fallen 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.²⁸ As a result, only 30 Su-27s, in two variants, have been deployed.²⁹ In July 2021, Russia premiered the prototype for its Su-75 LTS Checkmate, which purportedly will be “the world’s second single-engine fighter plane to incorporate the most sophisticated radar-evasion and command systems.”³⁰ The only other plane in this category is the F-35. But there are serious doubts about the Su-75’s design and, given the delays that plagued other advanced Russian aircraft, Russia’s ability to build the Su-75 at the promised cost and according to the promised schedule.³¹

In December 2019, Russia’s sole aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, caught on fire during repair work.³² The carrier was scheduled to begin sea trials in 2022,³³ but the addition of a propeller-rudder system, hull repairs, and an assortment of delays in other maintenance work have caused the trials to be delayed until 2024.³⁴ The carrier finally left dry dock in February 2023, but repairs continue, and the ship reportedly lacks a crew.³⁵ In May 2019, reports surfaced that Russia is seeking to begin

construction of 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

Following years of delays, the *Admiral Gorshkov* stealth guided missile frigate was commissioned in July 2018. According to one report, the Russian Navy is expected to add 10 new *Gorshkov*-class frigates and 14 *Steregushchiy*-class corvettes by 2027. At the end of 2022, only two *Gorshkov*-class frigates and six *Steregushchiy*-class corvettes had been deployed.³⁷ In January 2023, Russia used one of its *Gorshkov*-class frigates as the launching platform for a Zircon hypersonic cruise missile from the western Atlantic.³⁸ Russia reportedly is making significant upgrades to its nuclear-powered battle cruiser *Admiral Nakhimov* as well, but these modernizations have been postponed to 2024, and there are significant doubts about whether Russia's shipyards possess the necessary technical and financial capacity to complete the project.³⁹

In November 2018, Russia sold four *Admiral Grigorovich*-class frigates to India, which should take delivery of all four by 2026.⁴⁰ The ships had been intended for the Black Sea Fleet, but Russia found itself unable to produce a replacement engine following the imposition of sanctions after its 2014 invasion of Ukraine. Currently, only three *Admiral Grigorovich*-class frigates are in service.⁴¹

Russia's naval modernization continues to prioritize submarines. In June 2020, the first Project 955A Borei-A ballistic-missile submarine, the *Knyaz Vladimir*, was delivered to the Russian Northern Fleet as an addition to the three original Project 955 Boreis.⁴² Russia reportedly will construct a total of 10 Borei-A class submarines; five have been delivered, but not all may be operational.⁴³ Russia also has a further six Delfin-class ballistic missile submarines and has deployed two Yasen-M class cruise missile submarines.⁴⁴

The *Laika*-class submarines (previously called *Khaski*) are planned fifth-generation stealth nuclear-powered submarines. They are to be armed with Zircon hypersonic missiles, which have a reported speed of from Mach 5 to Mach 6.⁴⁵ According to a Russian vice admiral, these submarines will be two times quieter than current subs.⁴⁶ Construction of the first *Laika* was scheduled for the end of 2030, but whether Russia can afford the production costs is unclear.⁴⁷

Russia also continues to upgrade its diesel electric *Kilo*-class subs.⁴⁸ It reportedly inducted the first improved Project 6363 *Kilo*-class submarine into its Pacific Fleet in November 2019⁴⁹ and has deployed 10 of these vessels, although their operational status is unclear.⁵⁰ According to one assessment, "the submarine class lacks a functioning air-independent propulsion system, which reduced the boats' overall stealth capabilities."⁵¹ Russia's most recent Maritime Doctrine, published in July 2022, explicitly identifies the U.S. as Russia's main national security threat and strongly implies that the Russian navy will continue to focus on developing assets that can threaten the U.S.⁵²

Russian logistics remain an area of serious weakness. The RAND Corporation has noted that Russian airlift capacity in 2017 was a mere one-fifth of what it had been in 1992, just after the collapse of the Soviet Union,⁵³ and Russia has lost additional lift capacity in Ukraine.⁵⁴

Even more serious may be the lack of attention to logistics and supply that the Russian military has demonstrated in Ukraine. The U.K.'s Royal United Services Institute describes the initial Russian assault on Kyiv in 2022 as "a bad plan...executed poorly," in considerable part because the plan made no provision for resupply. As in other areas, Russian logistics capabilities can be impressive at the high end, but Russia is not always able to integrate these capabilities into larger operations or work as effectively across larger formations.⁵⁵

The same is true of high-end systems such as the S-500 surface-to-air missile system. This system has been plagued by repeated delays. Design development purportedly was completed in 2011, but full production has been delayed until 2025. The most impressive aspect of the S-500 system is its range; a 2018 test struck a target almost 300 miles away, and the system is purportedly capable of attacking low-orbit satellites. Russia appears to be delaying introduction of the S-500 system so that it can keep production lines open for export versions of the S-400 system, which points to the ongoing budgetary challenges facing its forces.⁵⁶ Even Russia's touted hypersonic Kinzhal missiles have underperformed in Ukraine.⁵⁷

Russia's counterspace and countersatellite capabilities are formidable. According to the U.S. Intelligence Community:

Russia continues to train its military space elements, and field new antisatellite weapons to disrupt and degrade U.S. and allied space capabilities. It is developing, testing, and fielding an array of nondestructive and destructive counterspace weapons—including jamming and cyberspace capabilities, directed energy weapons, on-orbit capabilities, and ground-based ASAT capabilities—to target U.S. and allied satellites.⁵⁸

With respect to cyber capabilities, the Intelligence Community assesses that ***“Russia will remain a top cyber threat as it refines and employs its espionage, influence and attack capabilities. Russia views cyber disruptions as a foreign policy lever to shape other countries’ decisions.”***⁵⁹

Military Exercises. Russian military exercises, especially snap exercises, have masked real military operations in the past. In March 2022, Air Force General Tod D. Wolters, then Commander, U.S. European Command (EUCOM), testified that “Russia maintains a large conventional force presence along NATO’s borders and conducts snap exercises to increase instability.”⁶⁰ Concerns were heightened and eventually validated when Russia used such exercises in the spring and fall of 2021 to position forces close to Ukraine’s borders with Russia and Belarus—forces that it ultimately used to invade Ukraine.

Russia’s snap exercises are conducted with little or no warning and often involve thousands of troops and pieces of equipment.⁶¹ In February 2022, just before Moscow’s second invasion of Ukraine, Russia and Belarus held joint snap exercises with 30,000 combat troops and special operations forces, fighter jets, Iskander dual-capable missiles, and S-400 air defense systems.⁶² In September 2022, Russia held joint military exercises with China and several other nations in Russia’s Far East and the Sea of Japan.⁶³ Like all such exercises, this one served a variety of purposes, from projecting strength and showing off Russian allies to displaying hardware for sale and signaling Russian interest in a region.⁶⁴

Russian Losses in Ukraine. The scale of Russian equipment losses in Ukraine is considerable. While no final accounting is possible, the open-source Oryx database has documented the destruction, damage, or capture of 1,937 Russian tanks, 838 armored fighting vehicles, and 2,317 infantry fighting vehicles, along with much other equipment.⁶⁵

These losses, along with the potentially even more significant losses of Russian officers and crews, have brought an increase in U.S. and allied security that has been achieved at a remarkably low proportionate cost in U.S. assistance. Nevertheless, as summarized by General Christopher Cavoli of EUCOM in his 2023 posture statement:

Russia remains a formidable and unpredictable threat that will challenge U.S. and European interests for the foreseeable future. Russian air, maritime, space, cyber, and strategic forces have not suffered significant degradation in the current war. Moreover, Russia will likely rebuild its Army into a sizeable and more capable land force, all while suspending its implementation of the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe, as it has done since 2007.⁶⁶

The war in Ukraine has demonstrated substantial weaknesses in the Russian armed forces and has significantly reduced Russia’s short-term ability to threaten U.S. and European interests in Europe, but it has also demonstrated the depth of Russia’s stocks of equipment, munitions, and supplies and the willingness of Putin’s government to continue to invest soldiers and treasure in the war, which is well into its second year.

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 does not currently appear to be a strong likelihood that Russia will use its nuclear capabilities against the United States directly, Putin “casts the war [in Ukraine] as an inevitable confrontation with the United States, which he accuses of threatening Russia by meddling in its backyard and enlarging the NATO military alliance,” and CIA Director William Burns has said that “none of us can take lightly the threat posed by a potential resort to tactical nuclear weapons or low-yield nuclear weapons” in Ukraine.⁶⁷

Russia’s most recent National Security Strategy does not mention NATO directly, but it does claim that the U.S. is planning to deploy medium-range and short-range missiles in Europe—a possibility that NATO firmly denies. The same document also clearly states that Russia will use every means at

its disposal to achieve its strategic goals. Among its “basic concepts” is “ensuring national security—the implementation by public authorities in cooperation with civil society institutions and organizations of political, legal, military, socio-economic, informational, organizational and other measures aimed at countering threats to national security.”⁶⁸

The most recent Russian military doctrine, which Putin signed in December 2014, specifically emphasizes the threat allegedly posed by NATO and global strike systems.⁶⁹ A 2020 doctrinal paper seemingly expanded the circumstances that Russia regards as justifying nuclear weapons use, and Russia’s rhetoric depicts it as inhabiting a harsh and Manichean world in which only the possession of nuclear weapons prevents it from being attacked and destroyed.⁷⁰

Strategic Nuclear Threat. Russia possesses the largest arsenal of nuclear weapons (including short-range nuclear weapons) among the nuclear powers: a total inventory of 5,899 as of March 28, 2023.⁷¹ 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 Russia’s strategic nuclear triad is expected to remain a priority” under the new state armament program.⁷² Admittedly, an aging nuclear workforce could impede this modernization, but modern weapons and equipment still allegedly constitute 91 percent of Russia’s nuclear triad.⁷³

Russia 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, where it uses the threat of nuclear attack to deter other countries from supporting Ukraine’s defense, but also in the Baltic States.⁷⁴ 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 renewed offensive against Ukraine that began in 2022.

Under Russian military doctrine, the use of nuclear weapons in conventional local and regional wars would be deescalatory because it would cause an enemy to concede defeat. In April 2022, for example, “Russia’s Foreign Minister said...that if the U.S. and Ukraine’s other Western allies continue to arm the country as it battles Moscow’s invading forces, the risk of the war escalating into a nuclear conflict ‘should not be underestimated.’”⁷⁵ General Cavoli discussed the risks presented by Russia’s nuclear weapons in his 2023 EUCOM posture statement:

Russia retains a vast stockpile of deployed and non-deployed nuclear weapons, which present an existential threat to the U.S. Homeland, our Allies, and partners, and is failing to comply with several ... legal obligations under the New START Treaty. President Putin’s dangerous nuclear rhetoric introduces strategic uncertainty.⁷⁶

Putin’s June 2020 executive order, “Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence,” outlines four scenarios in which Russia would use nuclear weapons:

19. The conditions specifying the possibility of nuclear weapons use by the Russian Federation are as follows:

- a) arrival of reliable data on a launch of ballistic missiles attacking the territory of the Russian Federation and/or its allies;
- b) use of nuclear weapons or other types of weapons of mass destruction by an adversary against the Russian Federation and/or its allies;
- c) attack by adversary against critical governmental or military sites of the Russian Federation, disruption of which would undermine nuclear forces response actions;
- d) aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy.⁷⁷

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 the government'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.

Just as it is doing to deter Western support for Ukraine, Moscow has repeatedly threatened U.S. allies in Europe with nuclear deployments and even preemptive nuclear strikes.⁷⁸ The Russians justify their aggressive behavior by pointing to deployments of U.S. missile defense systems in Europe. In the past, these systems were not scaled or postured to mitigate Russia's advantage in ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons to any significant degree, but laser-armed Strykers arrived in Europe in 2021, the U.S. deployed Patriot missile defense systems to Poland in March 2022, and NATO leaders reaffirmed their commitment to full development of NATO ballistic missile defense at the Madrid Summit in July 2022.⁷⁹

Russia continues to violate the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which bans the testing, production, and possession of intermediate-range missiles.⁸⁰ 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-8 cruise missile in violation of the INF Treaty early in 2017 and has deployed battalions with the missile at the Kapustin Yar missile test site in southern Russia, at Kamyshlov near the border with Kazakhstan, in Shuya east of Moscow, and in Mozdok in occupied North Ossetia.⁸¹ In March 2023, Putin announced that Russia would deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, which had relinquished its nuclear weapons to Russia in the 1990s in exchange for security guarantees.⁸²

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.⁸³ 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 2.⁸⁴ In 2023, the U.S. declared Russia noncompliant with the New START Treaty and denounced Moscow's invalid suspension of that treaty.⁸⁵

Russia's sizable nuclear arsenal remains the only threat to the existence of the U.S. homeland

emanating from Europe and Eurasia. Although the potential for use of this arsenal remains low, the fact that Moscow continues to threaten Europe with nuclear attack demonstrates that this substantial nuclear capability will continue to play a central strategic role in shaping both Russian military and political thinking and the level of Russia's aggressive behavior with respect to other countries.

Threat of Regional War

Many U.S. allies regard Russia as a genuine threat. At times, as seen in Russia's war against Ukraine, this threat is a military one. At other times, it involves less conventional tactics such as cyberattacks, exploitation of Russia's status as a source of energy, and propaganda. Today, as in the days of Imperial Russia, Moscow uses both the pen and the sword to exert its influence. Organizations like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), for example, embody Russia's attempt to bind regional capitals to Moscow through a series of agreements and treaties.

The Russian war against Ukraine has blunted Moscow's ability to employ some of these tactics: Europe, for example, is moving away from dependence on Russian energy. But considerable portions of the Third World see Russia through anti-Western eyes and are therefore untroubled by—or even approve of—its actions.

Russia's terrorist attacks in Europe itself, including the 2018 poisoning of Russian GRU defector Sergei Skripal with nerve agents in Salisbury, U.K., and the likely responsibility of Russian agents for the death of 14 people in the U.K. alone, have received less attention than they deserve.⁸⁶ So has Russia's responsibility for other forms of transnational repression, including its abuse of international legal cooperation mechanisms.⁸⁷ Finally, Russia's alleged responsibility for the attacks that destroyed the Nordstream 1 and 2 pipelines in October 2022 points again to Moscow's willingness to use force in minimally deniable ways that are profoundly destabilizing and threatening to its neighbors.

Russia also uses espionage to damage U.S. interests. In February 2022, the U.S. expelled 12 officials from Russia's mission to the United Nations. According to the U.S. Mission to the U.N., the officials had "abused their privileges of residency in the U.S. by engaging in espionage activities that are adverse

to our national security.”⁸⁸ In March 2022, Brussels, where the headquarters of NATO is located, expelled 21 Russian diplomats for “alleged threats and posing threats to security.”⁸⁹ According to one report, Russian spies are becoming harder to track because they infiltrate companies, schools, and governments.⁹⁰

Expulsions are not a permanent solution because “Russia tends to send back new spies to replace the ones who have left.”⁹¹ Though the expulsion of an estimated one-half of all Russian spies in Europe in the aftermath of Russia’s re-invasion of Ukraine will have dealt a blow to Russian capabilities, the fact that such spying occurs is further evidence of Russia’s willingness to use whatever means it feels is necessary to achieve its objectives.⁹² Russia also has sought to leverage its relations with its limited number of partners, including Nicaragua and Venezuela in the Western Hemisphere, to increase its intelligence collection capabilities.⁹³

Pressure on Nordic, Central, and Eastern Europe. Moscow poses a security challenge to members of NATO that border Russia. Until recently, a conventional Russian attack against a NATO member was thought unlikely, but Russia’s assault on Ukraine and threats against NATO members that support Ukraine raise the specter of a possible larger conflict involving NATO.

Russia continues to use cyberattacks, espionage, and propaganda to sow discord among NATO member states and undermine the alliance. After decades of Russian domination, the countries of 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, use of this as a rationale to justify its invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, and similar exploitation of this approach in the lead-up to its 2008 attack on Georgia.

The assessments of the three Baltic States are instructive. The Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, for example, concludes that:

The only existential threat to the security of our region, including Estonia’s sovereignty, stems from Russia. A military attack against

Estonia is unlikely in 2023, as the Russian Armed Forces units based near the Estonian border are engaged in hostilities in Ukraine. At the same time, Russia’s foreign policy ambitions driven by the Kremlin’s belligerence and imperialism have significantly increased the security threat.⁹⁴

According to Lithuania’s *National Threat Assessment 2023*:

The sanctions that weaken Russia’s economy will not impede the regime’s ability to prioritise the funding of increased military needs at the expense of public welfare. Nevertheless, the war against Ukraine will diminish the Russian military threat in the Baltic Sea Region only temporarily....

Russia justifies its expansionist policy by employing a historical narrative based on various manipulations of the Soviet victory against the Nazi Germany. This narrative promotes the Kremlin regime’s fictitious claims about exclusive interests in the post-Soviet region, whereas its aggressive policy and military actions are justified by the need to protect Russia’s influence⁹⁵

In words that still ring true today, Lithuania’s *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.⁹⁶

Latvian authorities describe the propaganda used by Russia against Ukraine in similar terms:

The task of war propaganda was...to artificially create an image of an “external enemy” for Russian society. Primarily, it was the imaginary “Nazi (in some cases also “fascist”) regime” in Kyiv. In other cases, it was NATO, the USA, Great Britain, or the Baltic States. In some cases, it was more convenient for Russian propaganda subjects to use the term “Anglo-Saxons” to describe their “external enemy.”⁹⁷

Although the Russian assault on Ukraine badly damaged Russia’s “so-called ‘compatriot’ policy,

which was previously the cornerstone of Russia's 'soft' power,"⁹⁸ by reducing Russia's attractiveness to ethnic Russians in Latvia, Latvia still assesses that "Russia in 2022 once again confirmed its status as an aggressor and its unfulfilled superpower ambitions."⁹⁹

In March 2017, General Curtis Scaparrotti, then Commander, U.S. European Command, and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe, characterized Russian propaganda and disinformation as an extension of Russia's military capabilities: "The Russians see this as part of that spectrum of warfare, it's their asymmetric approach."¹⁰⁰ That assessment remains true. As General Cavoli has recently pointed out, disinformation is one of the "range of tools" that Russia employs "to advance its foreign policy objectives to coerce neighboring states, divide the Alliance, and expand its global influence."¹⁰¹

Russia has sought to use disinformation to undermine NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in the Baltics. A disinformation campaign named Ghostwriter, for example, has been ongoing since 2017. In 2020, hackers "fabricated an interview with U.S. Army Europe commander Lt. Gen. Christopher Cavoli, which was published on a website notorious for spreading disinformation and was then picked up by other sites," alleging that he had made "statements about a lack of preparedness for [NATO's Defender Europe-20] exercise among Polish and Baltic militaries."¹⁰² In 2022, according to the government of Lithuania, "Ghostwriter...significantly decreased its activity against NATO states."

It is likely that the decrease in cyber-enabled information operations in Lithuania is temporary and related to redirected effort towards Ukraine, which has been a target of numerous Ghostwriter attacks in recent years. Nonetheless, attempts to gather Lithuanian citizens' data indicate likely plans to target Lithuania in the future attacks.¹⁰³

U.S. troops stationed in Poland for NATO's eFP have been the target of similar Russian disinformation campaigns.¹⁰⁴ In 2020, "Russian-sponsored actors released a forged letter online where Polish Brigadier General Ryszard Parafianowicz appeared to criticize openly the American presence in his country during the US-led exercise Defender-Europe 20."¹⁰⁵ As noted, a fabricated interview with

General Cavoli published online was similarly meant to undermine NATO's reputation among the public.¹⁰⁶ As one report put it, "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."¹⁰⁷

In February 2022, the Baltics and Poland together urged the largest social media companies to restrict Russian disinformation about the war in Ukraine from "spreading across [their] platforms." The Baltic States also banned a number of Russian and Belarusian channels that allegedly were disseminating propaganda to justify Moscow's war.¹⁰⁸ In March 2022, the EU's Council of Europe banned Russian state media outlets RT and Sputnik.¹⁰⁹

Most important of all, Russia has repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to use military force to change the borders of Europe. Vladimir Putin rose to power in Russia because of his role in Russia's second war against Chechnya in 1999. In 2008, under Putin, Russia attacked Georgia. When Kremlin-backed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich failed to sign an Association Agreement with the EU in 2013, 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 annexation of Crimea, the first forcible annexation of territory in Europe since World War II.¹¹⁰

Russia's annexation effectively cut Ukraine's coastline in half, and Russia claimed rights to underwater resources off the Crimean Peninsula.¹¹¹ Russia deployed 30,000 troops to Crimea and embarked on a major program to build housing, restore airfields, and install new radars on the peninsula.¹¹² In May 2018, Russia inaugurated the first portion of a \$7.5 billion, 11.8-mile bridge connecting Russia with Kerch in occupied Crimea.¹¹³ 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, depriving Ukraine of the revenue that it would have derived from associated port activity and the export and import of goods.¹¹⁴ In December 2019, Russia completed a new rail bridge over the Kerch Strait that the EU condemned as "yet another step towards a forced integration of the illegally annexed peninsula."¹¹⁵ The U.S., for its part, regularly protested

Russia's illegal restriction of Black Sea freedom of navigation.¹¹⁶

Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 with the goal of bringing the entire nation under Putin's control. Though Ukrainians defeated Russia's attempt to seize the capital and large swathes of central Ukraine, Russia rapidly occupied one-fifth of the country, an area that includes most of Ukraine's industrial sector, its port cities on the Black Sea, and the major transport corridors for grain exports. In September 2022, Russia held fake referenda in occupied portions of Ukraine, claiming that the results justified its annexations.¹¹⁷

Control of Crimea allows Russia to use the Black Sea as a platform from which to launch and support naval operations along the Ukrainian coastline as part of Moscow's renewed offensive against Ukraine.¹¹⁸ Russia also has been using the naval base at Sevastopol for operations in the Eastern Mediterranean, but Turkey's closure of the Bosphorus Strait to military traffic in late February 2022 in response to Russia's war against Ukraine has ended this option, at least temporarily.¹¹⁹ Before Turkey closed the Strait, the Black Sea fleet had received six *Kilo* diesel submarines and three *Admiral Grigovich*-class frigates equipped with Kalibr-NK long-range cruise missiles.¹²⁰ Kalibrs have a range of at least 2,500 kilometers, placing cities from Rome to Vilnius within range of Black Sea-based cruise missiles.¹²¹ In April 2022, in a significant operational and symbolic loss for Russia, Ukrainian forces sank the *Moskva* guided missile cruiser, which had been the flagship of Russia's Black Sea Fleet.¹²²

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

Russia stations about 1,500 troops in Transnistria, most of whom are reportedly local residents; Moldova formally accepts a few hundred of these personnel as peacekeepers. 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 conflict resolution process formally operates in a "5+2" format under the chairpersonship 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 an EU Border Assistance Mission, which has sought to help Moldova and Ukraine combat transborder crime and facilitate trade. Since 2022, the Mission has contributed to refugee crisis management and assisted the EU's efforts to establish alternative land routes for Ukrainian exports.¹²³

Russia continues to occupy 12 percent of Moldova's territory. 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.¹²⁴ In February 2022, a few weeks before Russia's second invasion of Ukraine, Russian armed forces staged military drills in Transnistria. Concerns that Russian troops stationed in Transnistria could be mobilized for the war in Ukraine persist.¹²⁵

Russia's other major ally in Europe is Serbia. Balkan politics are exceptionally complicated, but Russia's goal in the Balkans is clear: to create difficulties for NATO and the EU in the region by supporting Serbia's position on Kosovo.¹²⁶ While Russia has not deployed large-scale military forces to Serbia and is unlikely to do so, it does cultivate Balkan paramilitary groups and encourage cooperation between the Wagner Group and Serbia. In essence, Moscow wants to ensure that the frozen conflict in the Balkans, like the one in Moldova, does not thaw to Russia's disadvantage.¹²⁷

Russia's major outpost in Europe, Kaliningrad, also remains a strategic challenge. Russia's permanent stationing of Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad in 2018 occurred a year to the day after NATO's eFP deployed to Lithuania.¹²⁸ Russia reportedly has deployed tactical nuclear weapons, the S-400 air defense system, and P-800 anti-ship cruise missiles to Kaliningrad.¹²⁹

Russian missile deployments are not limited to Kaliningrad. Russia has outfitted a missile brigade in Luga, Russia, just 74 miles from the Estonian city of Narva, with Iskander missiles.¹³⁰ It also has deployed Iskanders to the Southern Military District at Mozdok near Georgia, and Russian military officials have reportedly asked manufacturers to increase the missiles' range and improve their

accuracy.¹³¹ Russia has been firing Iskanders with “mystery munitions,” described as “decoys meant to trick air-defense radars and heat-seeking missiles,” at targets in Ukraine.¹³² It also deployed Iskander missiles, as well as the S-400 air defense system, to Belarus in 2022, and Belarusian officials have stated that these systems are operational.¹³³

Nor is Russia deploying missiles only in Europe. Russia announced plans to deploy additional missile systems on Paramushir and Matua, two islands in the northern portion of the Kuril Island chain claimed by Japan, in September 2019;¹³⁴ announced the deployment of S-300V4 air defense missile systems on Iturup in December 2020;¹³⁵ deployed Bastion coastal defense missile systems to Matua in December 2021;¹³⁶ conducted military drills on the Kuril Islands that involved more than 3,000 troops and hundreds of pieces of army equipment in March 2022;¹³⁷ and announced its deployment of the Bastion coastal missile system on the Kuril Islands in December 2022.¹³⁸

Russia represents a real and potentially existential threat to NATO member countries in Nordic, Central, and Eastern Europe. In addition to its aggression in Georgia and Ukraine, support for Transnistria, and outpost in Kaliningrad, Russia has threatened countries that provide support to Ukraine. It also has threatened Finland and Sweden because of their desire to join NATO.¹³⁹ As long as the war in Ukraine continues, Russia is not likely to seek conventional conflict on other fronts, but it will continue to use nonlinear means in an effort to pressure and undermine the NATO alliance and any non-NATO country that opposes Moscow’s political objectives.

Militarization of the High North. Because nationalism is on the rise in Russia, Vladimir Putin’s Arctic militarization strategy is popular among the population. For Putin, the Arctic is an area that allows Russia to flex its muscles without incurring any significant geopolitical risk.

Russia is also eager to promote its economic interests in the region. Half of the world’s Arctic territory and half of the Arctic region’s population are located in Russia. It is well known that the Arctic is home to large stockpiles of proven but unexploited oil and gas reserves, most of which are thought to be located in Russia. In particular, Russia hopes that the Northern Sea Route (NSR) will become one of the world’s most important shipping lanes.

According to one report, “[t]he Kremlin’s dominance due to its unique topography and overwhelming military presence has made it impregnable in the Arctic.”¹⁴⁰ Additionally, “Russian hardware in the High North area includes bombers and MiG31BM jets, and new radar systems close to the coast of Alaska.”¹⁴¹ In February 2023, Admiral Daryl Caudle, head of U.S. Fleet Forces Command, stated that “Russia now has six bases, 14 airfields, 16 deep-water ports, and 14 icebreakers built” in the region and “dominate[s] the Arctic geography and possess[es] the corresponding ability to dominate in capability and infrastructure.”¹⁴²

According to U.S. Second Fleet Commander Vice Admiral Dan Dwyer, Russia’s new maritime doctrine, released in July 2022, shows that Moscow is “prioritizing the Arctic as its most important maritime direction, pledging to protect these waters ‘by all means.’ This includes increasing attention on the Arctic littorals as well as the introduction of new missile capabilities...to focus on its bastion of the Northern Fleet.” Previously, “the Arctic was their number three priority. The Atlantic was their number one priority. Now Russians realize that the Arctic is the key to their economy and to their defense as they see the receding of the Arctic ice cap.”¹⁴³

Russia has staged a series of statement activities in the Arctic. In 2007, for example, Artur Chilingarov, then a member of the Russian Duma, led a submarine expedition to the North Pole and planted a Russian flag on the seabed. Later, he declared that “[t]he Arctic is Russian.”¹⁴⁴ In March 2021, three Russian ballistic missile submarines punched through the Arctic ice near the North Pole.¹⁴⁵ In August 2022, during the Northern Fleet’s Barents Arctic exercise, a corvette based in Kaliningrad sailed to the White Sea in the Arctic where it fired a Kalibr cruise missile at a target on the coast.¹⁴⁶

In May 2017, Russia announced that its buildup of the Northern Fleet’s nuclear capacity is intended “to phase ‘NATO out of [the] Arctic.’”¹⁴⁷ In June 2022, Russia withdrew from a nuclear safety program in the Arctic region, raising concerns in the West “about a new period of heightened nuclear risks.”¹⁴⁸ Russia also has stationed a floating nuclear power plant on the northern coast of Siberia at the town of Pevek. It will provide energy for a number of resource extraction projects including gold and

tin mines. Russia's state-owned nuclear company Rosatom is seeking to build four additional floating reactors in the vicinity by 2030.¹⁴⁹

Although the Arctic region has been an area of low conflict among the Arctic powers, Russia's war against Ukraine and probing activities in the Arctic raise questions about whether that will remain true. It was recently reported, for example, that Russian fishing vessels with military radio equipment have docked in the Faroe Islands, which are strategically located just below the Arctic Circle between the coast of Iceland and Scotland in the United Kingdom, more than 200 times since 2015, likely conducting espionage.¹⁵⁰ NATO is a collective security organization that is designed to defend the territorial integrity of its members. Six NATO members (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and the United States) are Arctic countries, and all six have territory above the Arctic Circle.¹⁵¹

Because Russia is an Arctic power, its military presence in the region is to be expected, but it is also a matter of serious concern because of Russia's pattern of aggression. In the Arctic, sovereignty equals security. Respecting national sovereignty in the Arctic would ensure that the chances of armed conflict in the region remain low. Because NATO is an intergovernmental alliance of sovereign nation-states built on the consensus of its members, it has a role to play in Arctic security. In the words of NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg:

Russia's military build-up is the most serious challenge to stability and Allied security in the High North.... A strong, firm and predictable Allied presence is the best way to ensure stability and protect our interests. We cannot afford a security vacuum in the High North. It could fuel Russian ambitions, expose NATO, and risk miscalculation and misunderstandings.¹⁵²

In March 2017, a decree signed by Putin gave the Federal Security Service (FSB), which controls law enforcement along the Northern Sea Route, an Arctic shipping route linking Asia and Europe as well as additional powers to confiscate land "in areas with special objects for land use, and in the border areas."¹⁵³ 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 2018.¹⁵⁴

The Russian National Guard, which reports to Putin, 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 2017.¹⁵⁵ In April 2021, shareholders of Novatek, Russia's second-largest natural gas producer, "approved external financing of \$11 billion for the Arctic LNG 2 project, which [was] expected to start production of [LNG] in 2023."¹⁵⁶ In December 2022, Novatek announced that despite sanctions, it is still seeking to begin gas production at the site in December 2023.¹⁵⁷

In May 2018, Putin issued a presidential decree setting a target of 80 million tons shipped across the NSR by 2024.¹⁵⁸ In 2022, 34 million tons of goods, mostly oil and gas, were shipped by way of the NSR. Despite the impact of sanctions, Russia has announced new investments in ice monitoring systems and the deepening of shipping channels for a new Arctic oil terminal along the NSR.¹⁵⁹

Russia also has been investing in military bases in the Arctic. Its Arctic Trefoil base on Alexandra Land Island, commissioned in 2017, can house 150 soldiers for up to 18 months.¹⁶⁰ Old Soviet-era facilities have been reopened, and more that are currently mothballed could be refurbished if necessary.¹⁶¹ All of the land forces from many Russian bases on the Kola Peninsula have been sent to Ukraine to fight in a war that "has taken a toll on both Russian Arctic readiness and its deployable assets."¹⁶² Nevertheless, Russia has continued to make steady progress on basing improvements in the region.

[Satellite images] demonstrate continued work on the radar stations at the Olenegorsk site, on the Kola Peninsula in northwest Russia, and at Vorkuta, just north of the Arctic circle. They also appear to show work moving ahead to complete one of five Rezonans-N radar systems at Ostrovnoy, a site located by the Barents Sea, near Norway and Finland in Russia's west. The Rezonans-N systems are claimed by Russian officials to be able to detect stealth aircraft and objects.

Three new radomes, the weatherproof enclosures used to protect radar antennas, were completed this year at the Tiksi air defense site, in the far northeast.... There are also improvements to a runway and parking apron at Nagurskoye air base—Russia’s northernmost military facility—and runway improvements at “Temp” air base, on Kotelny Island, in the northeast of the country.¹⁶³

In 2017, Russia activated a new radar complex on Wrangel Island.¹⁶⁴ 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.¹⁶⁵ Construction of the cable began in August 2021 and is due to be completed in 2026.¹⁶⁶

Air power in the Arctic is increasingly important to Russia, which has 14 operational airfields in the region along with 16 deep-water ports, “a new command, and roughly 50 icebreakers...some of which are nuclear powered.”¹⁶⁷ Russia briefly paused long-range bomber and submarine patrols across the Arctic following its invasion of Ukraine but restarted them in November 2022.

According to Royal Canadian Air Force Lieutenant General Alain Pelletier, Deputy Commander, North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), Russia’s “activities are not only limited to the long-range aviation. Russia uses its submarines now both on the Atlantic coast and the Pacific coast to actually demonstrate its strategic capabilities and to present a threat to North America.”¹⁶⁸ During joint exercises with China in September 2022, at least four Russian and three Chinese naval vessels sailed in a single formation within the U.S. exclusive economic zone (EEZ) about 75 nautical miles off Kiska Island in the Alaskan Aleutians in “Moscow and Beijing’s second joint patrol in 12 months.”¹⁶⁹

In November 2022, Russia launched the *Yakutia*, the fourth Project 22220 nuclear-powered icebreaker.¹⁷⁰ Russia’s fleet of icebreaker and ice-capable ships is around 10 times the size of the U.S. fleet.¹⁷¹

Russia also has invested heavily in developing drones capable of operating in the High North. According to a Finnish unmanned aircraft specialist:

In 2019, state sources announced the existence of another UAV [unmanned aerial vehicle]

able to remain in-flight for four days in the Arctic without the need to rely on jammable satellite-based navigation. In 2021, Radar MMS introduced a heavy lift cargo drone capable of working at -70 degree Celsius. It is also documented that Russia is using underwater unmanned drones (UUVs), with some, such as the nuclear-powered Poseidon, developed particularly for Arctic waters.¹⁷²

Russia’s Northern Fleet “is made up of 26 submarines, 10 surface combatant ships, 16 patrol and coastal vessels, eight mine warfare/mine counter-measure ships, and eight amphibious platforms, plus fighter jets, anti-submarine aircraft and air defense systems.”¹⁷³ One U.S. ally believes that Russia will seek a more consistent presence in the Barents Sea and Atlantic Ocean through lengthened submarine patrols.¹⁷⁴

Though Russia’s development of its military capabilities in the Arctic region continues, the likelihood of armed conflict remains low. However, physical changes in the region mean that the posture of interested nations will continue to evolve. It is clear that Russia intends to exert a dominant influence. As summarized by a U.S. Department of State official:

[The U.S. has] concerns about Russia’s military buildup in the Arctic. Its presence has grown dramatically in recent years with the establishments of new Arctic commands, new Arctic brigades, refurbished airfields and other infrastructure, deep water ports, new military bases along its Arctic coastline, an effort to establish air defense and coastal missile systems, early warning radars, and a variety of other things along the Arctic coastline. We’ve seen an enhanced ops [operations] tempo of the Russian military in the Arctic, including last October one of the largest Russian military exercises in the Arctic since the end of the Cold War. So there is some genuine and legitimate concern there on the part of the United States and our allies and partners about that behavior in the Arctic.¹⁷⁵

Destabilization in the South Caucasus. The South Caucasus sits at a crucial geographical and cultural crossroads and has been 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.¹⁷⁶ The Georgian Foreign Ministry criticized the treaties as a step toward “annexation of Georgia’s occupied territories,”¹⁷⁷ 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.¹⁷⁸

South Ossetia’s former leader, Anatoli Bibilov, had planned to hold a referendum to decide whether the region should join Russia on July 17, 2022, but his successor, Alan Gagloev, has cancelled the plebiscite as “premature.”¹⁷⁹ 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”).¹⁸⁰ In May 2020, the U.S. embassy in Tbilisi reported that Russian-led security forces were continuing to erect unauthorized fences and reinforcing existing illegal “borderization” efforts near a number of Georgian villages.¹⁸¹

Russia maintains a sizable military presence in Armenia based on an agreement that gives Moscow access to bases in that country at least until 2044.¹⁸² The bulk of Russia’s forces, consisting of 3,500 soldiers, dozens of fighter planes and attack helicopters, 74 T-72 tanks, and an S-300 air defense system, are based around the 102nd Military Base.¹⁸³ Russia

and Armenia have also signed a Combined Regional Air Defense System agreement. Despite the election of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in 2018 following the so-called Velvet Revolution, Armenia’s cozy relationship with Moscow remains unchanged.¹⁸⁴ Armenian troops even deployed alongside Russian troops in Syria to the dismay of U.S. policymakers.¹⁸⁵

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.¹⁸⁶ 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. In 2020, major fighting broke out along the front lines. After six weeks of fighting and 7,000 killed, Azerbaijan liberated its internationally recognized territory, “which had been under Armenian occupation since the early 1990s.”¹⁸⁷

The conflict ended on November 9, 2020, when Armenia and Azerbaijan signed a Russian-brokered cease-fire agreement.¹⁸⁸ Azerbaijan had won a decisive victory, recovering most of the land taken by the Armenians in the first conflict. As part of the nine-point cease-fire plan, nearly 2,000 Russian peacekeeping soldiers were deployed to certain parts of Nagorno–Karabakh that are populated largely by ethnic Armenians. Russia remained the primary influencer in the region, serving as sole mediator for the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict and providing a peacekeeping force, yet maintained at least three military bases in Armenia and sold arms to both sides of the conflict.

By mid-2022, it was clear that two significant factors had affected the military situation on the ground. First, Azerbaijan developed strong defense ties with Turkey and Israel in the decade preceding the cease-fire. The billions of dollars in sophisticated weapons and technology acquired from Israel¹⁸⁹ and advanced military training received from Turkey have contributed to Azerbaijan’s military superiority in the South Caucasus.¹⁹⁰ The Azerbaijan–Israel–Turkey “troika” has been a disruptor within the Russian sphere of influence.

Second, since Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, Russia’s dominance in the South Caucasus has diminished significantly. To sustain its war effort in the face of significant losses:

The Russian military redeployed elements of the 15th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade—Russia’s only dedicated peacekeeping brigade—from Nagorno-Karabakh to Ukraine in March 2022. Ukraine’s General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces severely degraded the 15th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade, killing about 800 and wounding about 400 soldiers of the brigade’s 1,800 soldiers that deployed to Ukraine as of June 2022. Russia will likely lose military influence in other post-Soviet states since Moscow has redeployed elements of permanently stationed Russian forces from Russian bases in Kyrgyzstan, occupied Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), and Tajikistan to fight in Ukraine.¹⁹¹

For decades, Russia has viewed the South Caucasus as a vital theater and has used 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. and NATO interests. It is certain that Russian influence in the region will continue, but current factors on the ground have caused its power to decline, at least temporarily.

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 civil war by saving Bashar al-Assad from being overthrown and strengthening 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 and Putin probably share.¹⁹² Russia’s Hmeymim Air Base is located close to Idlib, making it vulnerable to attacks from rebel fighters and terrorist groups, and Moscow instinctively desires to protect its assets. Though Assad’s only goal is to restore sovereignty over all of Syria, Russia’s main focus is maintaining its position in the region. Moscow therefore leverages its support for Assad to achieve that end.

In January 2017, Russia signed an agreement with the Assad regime to “expand the Tartus naval facility, Russia’s only naval foothold in the Mediterranean, and grant Russian warships access to Syrian waters and ports.... The agreement will last for 49

years and could be prolonged further.”¹⁹³ Russia reportedly is reinforcing its naval group in the Mediterranean Sea with warships and submarines armed with Kalibr cruise missiles.¹⁹⁴ In May 2021, the Voice of America reported that Russia is expanding its navy base at Tartus and “planning to construct a floating dock to boost the port’s ship repair facilities.”¹⁹⁵ Russia maintains 2,500 troops in Syria.¹⁹⁶

The agreement with Syria also includes upgrades to the Hmeymim Air Base at Latakia, including repairs to a second runway.¹⁹⁷ Russia is extending one of its two runways by 1,000 feet, which would “allow the base to support more regular deployments of larger and more heavily-laden aircraft.”¹⁹⁸ In May 2021, Russia declared the ability to operate nuclear-capable bombers from Hmeymim as a result of recent airfield upgrades.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 on a 40-year agreement and continues to entrench its position there, as demonstrated by its recent building of reinforced concrete aircraft shelters.²⁰²

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-10.²⁰³ That same month, Russia stated that U.S. and allied aircraft would be banned from flying over large areas of Syria pursuant to a deal made 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.”²⁰⁴

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, although not nearly as often. From March 2022 to May 2023, Russian aircraft violated deconfliction protocols more than 80 times, including by flying over U.S. troops more than 24 times.²⁰⁵ In February 2022, U.S. F-16 fighter jets and other coalition aircraft escorted three Russian aircraft in eastern Syria when the Russians flew into coalition-restricted

airspace.²⁰⁶ Another notable incident occurred in November 2022 when Russia fired an SA-22 Pantsir surface-to-air missile against a U.S. MQ-9 Reaper drone over Syria. The missile passed within 40 feet of the drone, which was damaged when the missile detonated.²⁰⁷

In October 2018, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi signed a strategic cooperation treaty with Russia.²⁰⁸ In November 2018, hoping to solidify its relations with Egypt, Russia approved a five-year agreement for the two countries to use each other's air bases.²⁰⁹ Since then, Egypt and Russia have expanded their ties to include tourism, energy, political coordination, and military support.²¹⁰ Leaked intelligence reports detail a plan under which Egypt would secretly produce and deliver 40,000 rockets along with gunpowder to Russia, although it is believed that this plan has not yet been implemented.²¹¹

Russia remains active in Libya. Wagner units reportedly “are mostly present in the eastern region, specifically at al-Khadim air base near al-Marj city as well as in the cities of Sirte and al-Jufrah in the central region...where the majority of Wagner's fighters and most valuable assets, including its advanced air defense systems and fighter jets, are believed to be located.”²¹² The Wagner Group, a private military company with direct ties to President Putin, aided the failed efforts of Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army to take control of the capital beginning in 2018. Today, Wagner uses its presence in Libya as a “forward base for its activities in the Sahel region, particularly Chad and Niger,” and “has managed to build spheres of influence with local communities and smuggling networks in the southern border regions of Libya, where the group has helped provide weapons and at times extraction technologies for gold or other precious metals.”²¹³

Russia has stepped up its military operations in the Mediterranean significantly, often harassing and/or shadowing U.S. and allied vessels. Russia has used its Mediterranean capabilities to support its war against Ukraine. For instance, its Mediterranean Task Force of 10 to 15 vessels served as “a latent naval capability in the eastern Mediterranean,” facilitating a rapid scaling-up of Russia's presence as the invasion [of Ukraine] approached.²¹⁴ Some allies believe that, notwithstanding its actions in Ukraine, Russia will remain an active presence in the Mediterranean. According to one assessment:

[T]here will be a major reverberation in the Mediterranean, and we will have to deal with it for a long time. Because this is where Moscow's sources of supply are, because North Africa is an area that the Russians want to destabilise and we must move to prevent this. From the coastal states to the Sahel, Russian activity is known and will manifest itself with greater intensity in the coming years.²¹⁵

The Balkans. Security has improved dramatically in the Balkans since the 1990s, but violence based on religious and ethnic differences remains a possibility. These tensions are exacerbated by sluggish economies, high unemployment, political corruption, and the malign influence of Russia and China. As General Cavoli has noted:

Russia continues to fan existing ethnic tensions to impede Euro-Atlantic alignment and integration. The PRC has emerged as an alternative for economic and defense cooperation. PRC loans and investment in the Western Balkans focus on large-scale transportation, energy, and information infrastructure, which contribute further to disruption in the region.²¹⁶

Russia's interests in the Western Balkans are at odds with the 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.²¹⁷

Senior members of the Russian government have alleged that NATO enlargement in the Balkans is one of the biggest threats to Russia.²¹⁸ NATO now includes four Balkan countries: Albania and Croatia, both of which became member states in April 2009; Montenegro, which became NATO's 29th member state in June 2017; and

North Macedonia, which became NATO's 30th member state in March 2020.

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 who were 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 presiding trial judge, Suzan Mugosa, said on May 9 that [Eduard] Shishmakov and [Vladimir] Popov "pursued a joint decision to make intentional attempts to contribute significantly to the carrying out of the planned criminal actions with the intention to seriously threaten the citizens of Montenegro, to attack the lives and bodies of others, and to seriously threaten and damage Montenegro's basic constitutional, political, and social structures in order to stop Montenegro from joining the NATO alliance."²¹⁹

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. Russia is the largest investor in Montenegro, and the loss of Russian (as well as Ukrainian) tourists in 2022 hurt the Montenegrin economy.²²⁰ Russian citizens, however, have been able to enter Montenegro overland from Serbia, and as of February 2023, 13,000 Russians had settled in Montenegro since the onset of the war.²²¹ Montenegro's responses to the war against Ukraine include closing its air space to Russian flights and hosting a significant number of Ukrainian citizens, equivalent to around 5 percent of the population, making it a nation that has accepted one of the largest numbers of Ukrainian refugees per capita.²²²

In March 2022, after Russia's second invasion of Ukraine, the Montenegrin government joined European sanctions on Russia, albeit "without specifying what they were."²²³ Montenegro's aid to Ukraine has included ammunition, spare parts for Mi-8 helicopters, and mortars as well as such non-lethal assistance as body armor, helmets, and meals.²²⁴

Russian cyberattacks against Montenegro include one in August and September 2022 that "crippled online government information platforms and put Montenegro's essential infrastructure, including banking, water and electricity power systems, at high risk."²²⁵ Russia also seeks to sow discord and bolster its influence and narratives by means of intelligence gathering, elite capture, and control of vital media channels, usually through the nation's dominant Serbian media market.²²⁶ In September 2022, Montenegro expelled six Russian spies and "revoked residence permits and banned entry to 28 foreign citizens it accused of spreading 'malign influence' in the interest of unidentified foreign services."²²⁷

In March 2023, Montenegro's President Milo Djukanovic stated that Western neglect was partly to blame for Russian influence in the region: "The European Union in the past 10 years didn't know what to do with the Western Balkans, but Russia did. It has developed its network in the Balkans."²²⁸ Stopping the region's movement toward Western institutions remains a Russian priority, albeit with mixed results.

For example, North Macedonia's accession to NATO was heavily targeted by Russia, which 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.²²⁹ In 2018, after North Macedonia was invited to join NATO, Russia's ambassador to the EU warned that "there are errors that have consequences."²³⁰ 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 that opposed the agreement.²³¹

Disinformation and propaganda are important weapons in Russia's campaign to undermine the Western Balkans. In April 2023, the head of the U.S. Department of State's Global Engagement Center noted that the Western Balkans have been "pretty seriously poisoned" by Russian disinformation.²³² Cyberattacks targeted primarily against government institutions are another weapon wielded by Moscow (along with other state actors including

Iran) and have affected nearly every nation in the region over the past year.²³³ In one recent cyberattack campaign linked to Iran and Russia, countries like North Macedonia were overwhelmed with fake bomb threats that often targeted hospitals and schools.²³⁴

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.²³⁵

Serbia has been a notable purchaser of Russian arms including battle tanks, armored personnel carriers, Pantsir air defense systems, helicopters, and anti-tank missiles.²³⁶ In February 2023, Serbia announced its interest in procuring French Rafale jets, partly because sanctions have limited its ability to acquire replacement parts for its fleet of MiGs.²³⁷ Russia also retains the so-called Russian–Serbian Humanitarian Center at Niš, “widely believed to be a Russian spy base” and located “only 58 miles from NATO’s Kosovo Force mission based in Pristina.”²³⁸

Russia has used its cultural ties to increase its role in Serbia, positioning itself as the defender of orthodoxy and investing funds in the refurbishing of orthodox churches.

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.²³⁹ Events in Ukraine, especially the annexation of Crimea, have inspired more separatist rhetoric, but Russia’s second invasion of Ukraine allegedly has delayed Republika Srpska’s plans to withdraw from Bosnia and Herzegovina’s state institutions.²⁴⁰ In June 2022, the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina ruled unconstitutional the Declaration on Constitutional Principles of Republika Srpska passed by the entity’s national assembly in December 2021, which allowed “the establishment of an army at the entity level, the exit from the taxation system, and the establishment of the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors within the entity.”²⁴¹ Following the decision, Dodik reiterated Republika Srpska’s intention to move forward with the declaration despite the court’s ruling.²⁴²

In many ways, Russia’s relationship with Republika Srpska is akin to its relationship with Georgia’s South Ossetia and Abkhazia occupied 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 again 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.²⁴³ In October 2018, just days before elections, Putin hosted Dodik as they watched the Russian Grand Prix in a VIP box.²⁴⁴

When Dodik visited Moscow in December 2021, the Kremlin refrained from announcing the meeting ahead of time, but Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov asserted that “this by no means belittle[d] the importance of the meeting.”²⁴⁵ In September 2022, Dodik again visited Moscow where he reiterated support for Russia’s war in Ukraine and discussed with Putin the “construction of a gas pipeline and two gas-fired power plants in Republika Srpska, as well as strengthening cultural cooperation by building a Russian-Serbian Orthodox center.”²⁴⁶ 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 are illegal.²⁴⁷

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.”²⁴⁸ Veterans organizations in Russia and Republika Srpska have developed close ties.²⁴⁹

Russia has cultivated strong ties with Republika Srpska’s security forces. 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” that serves as the headquarters for “anti-terrorist units, logistics units, and a department to combat organized crime.”²⁵⁰

Russia also has continued to oppose the recognition of Kosovo as an independent sovereign country²⁵¹ and has condemned Kosovo’s creation of its own army. Moscow seeks to derail Kosovo’s efforts to integrate into the West, often by exploiting the Serbian minority’s grievances. In December 2022, Kosovo’s Interior Minister Xhelal Svecla accused Serbia and Russia of seeking to destabilize Kosovo. Ethnic Serbs living in Kosovar towns erected barricades during protests related to the “arrest of a former Serb police officer working in the Kosovar force” as well as on-again, off-again protests related to the issuance of license plates. Svecla accused Russia and Serbia of directly orchestrating the protests in an effort to destabilize Kosovo.²⁵²

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 eventually will 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 successfully encouraging the region to join the transatlantic community. In the words of North Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski, “It seems...that the so-called soft

spot in the whole pan-European security architecture right now, apart from Ukraine of course...is the Western Balkans.”²⁵³ 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

The situation with respect to the “commons,” particularly European airspace, has become more unpredictable since Russia’s second invasion of Ukraine.

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 pilots’ behavior as “brazen Russian hostility.”²⁵⁴ In January 2021, a Russian Su-27 made a low pass near the USS *Donald Cook*, a guided missile destroyer in the Black Sea,²⁵⁵ and in June 2021, Russian fighter jets repeatedly harassed a Dutch frigate in the Black Sea.²⁵⁶

Russian threats to the maritime theater also include activity near undersea fiber-optic cables. Because these cables “carry 95 percent of daily worldwide communications” in addition to “financial transactions worth over \$10 trillion a day,”²⁵⁷ any disruption would cause a catastrophic reduction in the flow of capital. Many of these cables run through Irish territorial waters, and NATO’s Intelligence Chief has warned the nation to remain vigilant as Russia could target cables within their waters “in an effort to disrupt western life and gain leverage against those nations that are providing support to Ukraine.”²⁵⁸ Some analysts have argued that Russian flights and submarine activity off the Irish coast over the past decade are linked to a concerted effort to map undersea cables.²⁵⁹

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.²⁶⁰ In September 2021, it was caught loitering in the English Channel.²⁶¹ The Russian spy ship *Viktor Leonov* was spotted collecting

intelligence within 30 miles of Groton, Connecticut, in February 2018, and off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia in December 2019.²⁶² Russia is thought to be behind the April 2021 severing of one of two undersea cables linking Norway's Svalbard archipelago with the mainland.²⁶³ In 2022, similar incidents of fiber-optic sabotage occurred in southern France and the Shetland Islands.²⁶⁴

Russia is thought to be behind the September 2022 sabotage of the Nord Stream I and II pipelines. Three Russian naval vessels were observed in the area of the blasts during the time in question, and one vessel is capable of launching mini submarines. Additionally, in May 2023, Denmark's armed forces confirmed that one of their patrol vessels "had taken 26 photos of a Russian submarine rescue vessel named SS-750 near the Nord Stream blast site on September 22 last year, just days before the explosions happened."²⁶⁵ That same month, reports emerged that NATO strongly suspects that Russia has likely mined additional undersea pipelines and cables in the Baltic Sea.²⁶⁶ A recent joint report by Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish media, which interviewed intelligence sources as part of their investigations, stated that Russia may be mapping "wind farms, gas pipelines, and power and internet cables" in the region for sabotage in a potential future conflict.²⁶⁷

Airspace. Russia's provocative military flights near U.S. and European airspace have become both more frequent and more aggressive and reckless. In one incident from March 2023, two Russian Su-27 fighters harassed a U.S. MQ-9 Reaper drone operating over international airspace in the Black Sea before one of the jets collided with the Reaper's propeller, forcing it down. U.S. officials noted that "several times before the collision, the Su-27s dumped fuel on, and flew in front of the MQ-9 in a reckless, environmentally unsound and unprofessional manner."²⁶⁸

"We know that the intercept was intentional," remarked Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley. "We know that the aggressive behavior was intentional."²⁶⁹ Russia recovered at least parts of the drone for intelligence-gathering purposes,²⁷⁰ and U.S. officials announced that steps were taken to "minimize any effort by anybody else to exploit that drone for useful content."²⁷¹ After this incident, the U.S. began to fly missions farther south in the Black Sea—a change that, as one U.S. official has stated, "definitely limits our ability to gather intelligence."²⁷²

In September 2022, a Russian fighter jet attempted to fire a missile at a manned British RC-135 Joint Rivet surveillance aircraft flying off the coast of occupied Crimea in international airspace over the Black Sea. The Russian pilot is reported to have believed mistakenly that he had been given permission to fire, but the "missile did not launch properly." British surveillance flights in the theater were initially suspended before being restarted with fighter escorts.²⁷³

In May 2023, a Polish Turbolet L-410 flying in international airspace off the Romanian coast in the Black Sea for the EU border agency Frontex was intercepted by a Russian Su-35, which "flew without any radio contact into the operational area designated by Romania, and then performed aggressive and dangerous maneuvers." The Russian pilot's three separate approaches included flying within 16 feet across the front of the Polish plane with the resulting turbulence temporarily causing the Polish crew to lose control of their aircraft.²⁷⁴ NATO responded by placing its Air Policing units in the region on a higher state of readiness.²⁷⁵

The number of Western intercepts of Russian aircraft has increased significantly. In 2021, NATO jets scrambled 290 times to monitor and intercept Russian jets;²⁷⁶ in 2022, there were almost twice as many: 570.²⁷⁷ In March 2023, Norway intercepted two Russian IL-38 reconnaissance planes off the coast of its Finnmark region, and in April 2023, Norway scrambled two F-35s to intercept two TU-160 Blackjack strategic bombers, two IL-78 tankers, and three MiG-31 fighters flying in the same region.²⁷⁸

There have been several incidents involving Russian military aircraft flying in Europe without using their transponders. In April 2023, for example, two Su-27 fighter jets and an IL-20 reconnaissance aircraft were flying in the Baltic Sea with their transponders switched off.²⁷⁹ German and British aircraft taking part in NATO Air Policing intercepted the aircraft.

There have been incidents near North American airspace as well. For two straight days in February 2023, Russian aircraft including Tu-95 strategic bombers flew into the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). The aircraft, which were intercepted by U.S. fighters, remained in international airspace and did not enter U.S. or Canadian airspace.²⁸⁰ A similar incident occurred in April. In the years since 2007, when "Russia resumed out of

area Long Range Aviation activity,” NORAD “has seen a yearly average of approximately six to seven intercepts of Russian military aircraft in the ADIZ. These numbers have varied each year from as high as 15 to as low as zero.”²⁸¹

There have been occasional upticks. In April 2021, for example, Lieutenant General David Krumm from Joint Base Elmendorf–Richardson, Alaska, revealed that during the previous year, there had been a large increase in Russian activity and that the U.S. had intercepted more than 60 Russian aircraft in the “most action the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone—a region spanning 200 nautical miles that reaches past U.S. territory and into international airspace—ha[d] seen since the Soviet Union fell in 1991.”²⁸²

Russian flights have targeted U.S. ally Japan as well. In March 2022, Japan scrambled a fighter jet to “warn off a helicopter believed to be Russian” that had entered Japanese airspace.²⁸³ In May 2022, when the QUAD²⁸⁴ was meeting in Tokyo, Japan again scrambled jets to warn off Russian and Chinese warplanes as they neared Japanese airspace.²⁸⁵ Nor is it only maritime patrol aircraft that fly near Japan. Russian Su-24 attack aircraft, for example, were intercepted in December 2018 and January 2019.²⁸⁶ In fiscal year (FY) 2022, Japan scrambled jets 150 times to respond to Russian aircraft, a 40 percent decrease from FY 2021 caused largely by Russia’s need for aircraft in its war against Ukraine²⁸⁷ yet still showing the importance that Russia assigns to such operations.

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 and, in the Black Sea, is intended to push U.S. and allied aircraft farther away from the theater.

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 members of the crew, over the skies of southeastern Ukraine.

Cyberspace. Russian cyber capabilities are sophisticated, active, and an ongoing threat to economic, social, and political targets around the world. Moscow also 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 continues to probe U.S. critical infrastructure. The U.S. Intelligence Community assesses that:

The Ukraine war was the key factor in Russia’s cyber operations prioritization in 2022. Although its cyber activity surrounding the war fell short of the pace and impact we had expected, Russia will remain a top cyber threat as it refines and employs its espionage, influence, and attack capabilities. Russia views cyber disruptions as a foreign policy lever to shape other countries’ decisions [and] is particularly focused on improving its ability to target critical infrastructure, including underwater cables and industrial control systems, in the United States as well as in allied and partner countries, because compromising such infrastructure improves and demonstrates its ability to damage infrastructure during a crisis.²⁸⁸

Russia continued to conduct cyberattacks on government and private entities in 2020 and 2021. In 2020, Russian hackers “reportedly infiltrated several US government agencies,” including the Defense, Treasury, Commerce, State, Energy, and Homeland Security Departments and the National Nuclear Security Administration, as well as private-sector companies like Microsoft and Intel. SolarWinds, the company whose software was compromised, “told the [Securities and Exchange Commission] that up to 18,000 of its customers installed updates that left them vulnerable to hackers.” It was estimated that “it could take months to identify all [the hackers’] victims and remove whatever spyware they installed.”²⁸⁹

In April 2021, the U.S. Treasury sanctioned Russia for the SolarWinds hack. It also sanctioned 32 Russian “entities and individuals” that had carried out “Russian government-directed attempts to influence the 2020 U.S. presidential election, and other acts of disinformation and interference.”²⁹⁰

In May 2021, a Russia-based hacking group known as DarkSide launched a cyberattack against Colonial Pipeline, “the operator of one of the nation’s largest fuel pipelines.”²⁹¹ The 5,500-mile pipeline, “responsible for carrying fuel from refineries along the Gulf Coast to New Jersey,” was down for six days.²⁹² Colonial Pipeline paid DarkSide \$90 million in Bitcoin as a ransom payment, but the Department of Justice was able to recover approximately \$2.3 million of that amount a few weeks later.²⁹³ In June 2021, REvil, a Russian cybercriminal group, launched a ransomware attack on JBS, “the world’s largest meat processing company.”²⁹⁴ JBS was forced to shut down all nine of its U.S. plants for a brief period.²⁹⁵

U.S. allies are a frequent target of Russian cyberattacks. Cyberattacks conducted by Russian hackers operating with the connivance of the Russian government are common, with the Baltic nations being particularly frequent targets.²⁹⁶ A March 2023 Thales report found that “the share of cyber-attacks targeting European Union (EU) countries has risen from 9.8% to 46.5% in the past six months. It’s an increase directly related to the Ukrainian conflict, while 61% of the attacks recorded globally for a year have been of Russian origin.” The report further notes that:

Since February 24, 2022 and the entry of Moscow’s troops into Ukraine, Baltic countries have been the targets of 157 attacks, ahead of Poland (114 incidents), the Nordic countries (95 incidents in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland) and Germany (58 incidents). Less exposed, France has recorded 14 attacks in one year. The latest victim of this wave of incidents has been the website of the Assemblée Nationale (lower house of parliament). It was made inaccessible for several hours on March 27, after an offensive by pro-Russian hackers.²⁹⁷

In addition to official intelligence and military cyber assets, Russia employs 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. 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.”²⁹⁸

In October 2022, Russian hackers attacked the websites of a dozen airports, knocking some offline (although not affecting airport operations).²⁹⁹ In April 2023, the European Organisation for the Safety of Air Navigation was hit by a similar cyberattack, which also did not affect flights but did interrupt parts of the organization’s website.³⁰⁰ U.S. hospitals have been another frequent target of Russian-based hackers.³⁰¹

Russia’s cyber capabilities are advanced and of key importance 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 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.

Cyber is a key component of Russia’s war against Ukraine. In February 2022, “[t]he European Union and its Member States, together with its international partners, strongly condemned the malicious cyber activity conducted by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, which targeted the satellite KA-SAT network, owned by Viasat.”³⁰² The attack, which began an hour before Russia launched its second invasion of Ukraine, “interrupted service for tens of thousands of broadband customers across Europe,” including in Ukraine, and “reportedly disrupted service for thousands of European wind turbines.”³⁰³

Ukraine has been a consistent and sustained target of Russian cyberattacks since 2014. The scale of these attacks was magnified in the period leading up to its second invasion in February 2022. Russia sought to leverage overwhelming cyberattacks to advance its military offensive. According to one analyst:

The intent appears to have been to create disorder and overwhelm Ukrainian defenses. Russia sought to disrupt services and install destructive malware on Ukrainian networks included [*sic*] phishing, denial of service, and

taking advantage of software vulnerabilities. One company identified eight different families of destructive software used by Russia in these attacks. The primary targets were Ukrainian government websites, energy and telecom service providers, financial institutions, and media outlets, but the cyberattacks encompassed most critical sectors. This was a wide-ranging attack using the full suite of Russian cyber capabilities to disrupt Ukraine, but it was not a success.

Russia's most significant cyber success so far was the disruption of the Viasat Inc's KA-SAT satellite. This created significant damage that spread beyond Ukraine but ultimately did not provide military advantage to Russia. The attack may have been intended to be part of a larger, coordinated cyberattack that proved unsuccessful, or the Russians may not have expected the rapid restoration of service that was provided with outside assistance.³⁰⁴

Estonia's Foreign Intelligence Service has noted similarly that:

Russian cyberattacks, like the actions of its armed forces, are likely aimed at wearing down Ukraine's cyber defenders and then finding the weakest link that would help achieve Russia's overall military goal—to wear down Ukraine, damage the international image and credibility of the Ukrainian leadership, reduce aid from allies, and undermine the society's morale. Therefore, a cyberattack need not actually disrupt an information system, as with each attack, investigators have to spend human and time resources to check whether and how extensively the information system has been attacked, how to improve defence, etc.³⁰⁵

Russia's cyber capabilities in the context of the war against Ukraine have not yielded the returns Russia had hoped to gain. Cyber defense preparation can play an important role in fending off attacks. While the decisiveness of Russian cyber capabilities should not be overstated, it also should not be underestimated. Moscow and affiliated groups have demonstrated repeatedly that they have both the ability and the willingness to use their cyber

capabilities aggressively to target not only U.S. and allied militaries and governments, but also critical infrastructure and softer targets such as medical systems as a way to sow discord and disruption within Western society.

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, especially given Russia's war in Ukraine. 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 with respect to America's allies in the region. Through NATO, the U.S. has pledged 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 therefore essential that the U.S. maintain 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. 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 ensure their continued relevance.

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 Intelligence Community's most recent Annual Threat Assessment states:

Moscow will continue to employ an array of tools to advance what it sees as its own interests and try to undermine the interests of the United States and its allies. These are likely to be military, security, malign influence, cyber,

*and intelligence tools, with Russia's economic and energy leverage probably a declining asset. We expect Moscow to insert itself into crises when it sees its interests at stake, the anticipated costs of action are low, it sees an opportunity to capitalize on a power vacuum, or, as in the case of its use of force in Ukraine, it perceives an existential threat in its neighborhood that could destabilize Putin's rule and endanger Russian national security.*³⁰⁶

Although Russia has expended much of its arsenal of munitions and has suffered significant losses

in its war against Ukraine, the decision by several countries to continue trading with Russia despite sanctions placed on the country is ensuring a steady flow of funds into Russia's accounts that Putin is using to continue funding his aggression. Russia will therefore continue to be a significant security concern for the U.S., its NATO partners, and other allies.

For these reasons, the *Index of U.S. Military Strength* continues to assess the threat from Russia as "hostile" for level of provocative 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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