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# What Provokes Putin's Russia?

## Deterring Without Unintended Escalation

**D**eterrence, defined as the effort to compel a state to renounce or abandon an intended aggression, presents an inherent dilemma.<sup>1</sup> While it purports to prevent aggression, a deterrent effort that is too heavy-handed—or appears to represent an existential threat to the potential aggressor—might prompt the precise response that it sought to avoid in the first place. In the context of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)–Russia relations, deterring without provoking requires an understanding of what Russia considers to be *redlines*, defined as those triggers that Russian leadership claims cannot be crossed without provoking a major reaction or hostile response on their part. Deterrence efforts can then stay below that line, visibly increasing the costs of aggression for Russia in relation to the benefits it hopes to gain, and limiting its options for harmful action without unintentionally escalating the situation and forcing it into an all-out response.

Yet a logical consequence of the argument above is that a potential aggressor always has an interest in exaggerating what constitutes a “provocation” or multiplying redlines to limit its opponent’s range of options. Pushed to its extreme, this

strategy evokes the concept of “brinkmanship” popularized by Thomas Shelling,<sup>2</sup> or the “madman theory”<sup>3</sup>—both of which consist of manipulating perceptions to make escalation appear more likely than it really is, scaring the other side into compliance.

This basic uncertainty of how far the other side can be pushed until it hits back is of particular importance for an alliance—in this case, NATO—where each member might hold a different view of what constitutes a safe distance from Russia. In the run-up to the 2014 NATO Wales Summit, for instance, Germany and several other NATO members argued against the permanent stationing of combat troops in Poland or the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), fearing that this might provoke Russia.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the Baltic states have consistently argued that trying to avoid provoking Russia at all costs serves no one’s interests but Moscow’s, and that Russian President Vladimir Putin only understands and respects strength.<sup>5</sup> As a result, while anything that might even remotely harm Russian interests might be construed by Moscow as a provocation, it is important to distinguish between those provocations that will likely prompt an unwanted reaction and those that Russia will likely brush aside with little more than political condemnation and diplomatic posturing.

The purpose of this Perspective is to provide a better understanding of what provokes Putin’s Russia, particularly in the context of NATO’s current deterrence efforts. Based on a review of English-language secondary sources,<sup>6</sup> with a focus on published RAND research, we first identify Russia’s claimed redlines. We then examine those developments that prompted Russia to escalate a dispute in the past, and compare them with the identified redlines. Next, we analyze how current (in this Perspective, as of October

2019) and future deterrence efforts on the part of the United States and NATO might collide with Russian stated interests and cross its redlines. We conclude by highlighting deterrent measures that might be safest to use with Russia to avoid risks of unintended escalation; flagging those deterrent measures that might present excessive risks; and discussing the measures—such as confidence-building or signaling mechanisms—that the United States and NATO can take to minimize or mitigate the risk of unintended escalation while deterring Russia.

## What Are Russia’s Claimed Redlines?

Russia’s key national interests, which guide its foreign policy, can be summarized around three themes: defending Russia’s borders and preserving the Russian regime; maintaining influence in the *near abroad* (broadly defined as countries formerly in the Soviet Union, minus the Baltic states);<sup>7</sup> and fulfilling the vision of Russia as a great power, which includes ensuring that it is being treated as such by other powers.<sup>8</sup> Actions by other countries that threaten these interests will likely prompt some reaction from Russia, but this reaction might be limited in scope and intensity unless specific thresholds, defined by Russian leadership, are crossed. We call these thresholds redlines for simplification, though in reality, these lines might be blurry and will likely leave some room for Russian leadership to decide on the scale of the response, or whether a response is warranted at all. The following redlines have been publicly mentioned by Russian leadership—including in official documents such as the Military Doctrine—as being unacceptable to Russia, and have prompted explicit threats of hostile responses. We identify four areas where

redlines have been made clear: NATO enlargement, disruption of the strategic balance, direct threat to eliminate or overthrow the Russian regime, and loss of influence in the near abroad. These areas sometimes overlap: NATO enlargement in former Soviet countries might allow the United States to deploy weapons in new areas that could threaten the strategic balance and the regime in Moscow, and it would also de facto pull the new member away from Russia's sphere of influence. Redlines also directly relate to one or more of the national interests outlined earlier. For instance, disruption of the strategic balance presents a clear threat to Russia's defense of its territory and regime.

### NATO Enlargement

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, Russia engaged in a dialogue with NATO, which resulted in the signing of the NATO-Russia Founding Act in 1997 and the creation of the NATO-Russia Council in 2002.<sup>9</sup> Yet the NATO-Russia relationship has since faltered, largely as a result of diverging views on issues ranging from the NATO intervention in, and later recognition of, Kosovo; the U.S. decision to go to war with Iraq; the enlargement of NATO toward Eastern Europe; and the Bush administration's 2002 withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty and subsequent deployment of ballistic missile defense systems in Poland and the Czech Republic.<sup>10</sup> The description of NATO as a danger for Russia has become a consistent feature of Russian strategic thinking, and is mentioned in Russia's 2010 and 2014 Military Doctrines,<sup>11</sup> while its 2015 National Security Strategy underlines "the unacceptability for the Russian Federation of the alliance's increased military activity and

the approach of its military infrastructure toward Russia's borders."<sup>12</sup>

Russia is particularly wary of further NATO enlargement, which it perceives as an encroachment on its sphere of influence.<sup>13</sup> Russia seeks to maintain a buffer zone between its territory and that of NATO, and preserving its sphere of influence is important economically, politically, and culturally.<sup>14</sup> A broader NATO presence also revives Russia's traditional fear of encirclement by hostile powers that, from the Russian perspective, seek to contain and weaken Russia. Additionally, Russia claims that it was misled into believing, during the talks that took place between then-U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, that NATO would not expand in an eastern direction.<sup>15</sup> In December 2015, following NATO's invitation for Montenegro to become a member, an official statement from the Kremlin noted that NATO's expansion could only "lead to response actions from the East," arguing that

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Russia needed to balance a stronger NATO presence on its Western front.<sup>16</sup> The Russian leadership has further warned that expansion to certain countries would be considered unacceptable. Finland and Sweden, for instance, have received clear threats of retaliation if they were to alter their official nonaligned stances,<sup>17</sup> with Putin declaring, in June 2017, that Sweden joining NATO would be perceived “as an additional threat for Russia” that Russia would possibly “eliminate.”<sup>18</sup> In this context, NATO extending a formal invitation to either a country that is within Russia’s near abroad or about which Russia warned of retaliation could be considered a redline.

### Disruption of Strategic Stability

Russia has inherited the Soviet Union’s nuclear arsenal and considers it a priority to maintain strategic stability with the United States, meaning it seeks to balance U.S. and Russian nuclear and nonnuclear capabilities so that neither country believes it can strike first and sustain an acceptable level of damage.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, Russia describes any conventional weapon that might alter this balance, inflict catastrophic damage on Russia, and threaten its second-strike capability as a threat. For instance, Russia’s 2014 Military Doctrine cites as a “main military threat” the “disruption of the functioning of its strategic nuclear forces, missile attack warning system, space surveillance system, nuclear weapon storage facilities, nuclear power engineering, the nuclear, chemical, pharmaceutical, and medical industry, and other potentially dangerous facilities.”<sup>20</sup> In Moscow’s view, a main military threat is the most serious type of threat.<sup>21</sup> Ballistic missile defense is one type of weapon system that the 2010 and 2014 Military Doctrines identify as a threat to strategic stability.<sup>22</sup> Russia has publicly threatened

various NATO members with retaliation if those members were to deploy radars or interceptors on their territories.<sup>23</sup>

Putin has also cited long-range precision weapons as presenting a clear threat to Russia.<sup>24</sup> Long-range precision weapons are mentioned in the 2014 Military Doctrine along with the U.S. Prompt Global Strike concept,<sup>25</sup> which Russia believes could target its command and control nodes and threaten its nuclear capability.<sup>26</sup> Finally, Russia is also concerned about the United States’ development of hypersonic weapons and other advancements in technology that could cause grave damage to Russian systems and threaten Russia’s second strike capability.<sup>27</sup>

### Risk to the Russian Leadership

Regime preservation represents another key interest for the Russian leadership. Threats to the regime can be military—through the potential use, by powers hostile to Russia, of a decapitation strategy that would annihilate the country’s leadership and leave a power vacuum—or political, through popular protest movements and other domestic developments that could overtake the current regime.

In terms of military threats, Russia fears that the United States—possibly joined by its allies—could conduct a massive strike on Russia to decapitate its political leadership or destroy a substantial portion of its nuclear arsenal, leaving it unable to retaliate effectively. Russia’s 2014 Military Doctrine identifies “obstruction of the operation of state and military command and control systems of the Russian Federation” as a “main military threat” to the Russian Federation.<sup>28</sup> Because of this, the deployment of weapon systems seen as potentially threatening the Russian leadership and regime survival is a Russian redline.

With regard to political threats, the Russian leadership perceives interference by an external power in Russia's internal affairs as a threat to regime stability, representing another Russian redline. Indeed, Moscow has been heavily critical of U.S. and Western regime change efforts, particularly in the Middle East. Russia opposed the Iraq War in 2003, the intervention in Libya in 2011, and the U.S. quest to unseat Syrian president Bashar al-Assad beginning in 2012. Moscow has also perceived the so-called color revolutions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005) as being piloted by the West, highly destabilizing, and potential harbingers of what could happen eventually in Moscow.<sup>29</sup> The 2015 Russian National Security Strategy explicitly mentions such revolutions as a threat to Russia.<sup>30</sup>

### Losing the Russian Sphere of Influence

One of Russia's longstanding concerns has been losing its sphere of influence, with one RAND Corporation report noting in 2012 that "Moscow is constantly seeking assurances from its neighbors that they will not join the West and try to get recognition from the West of a legitimate sphere of influence, with limited sovereignty for nations concerned."<sup>31</sup> The "West" here is represented not only by NATO, but also such other institutions as the European Union (EU), which Moscow is attempting to rival with its own Eurasian Economic Union. In this context, Russia's sphere of influence consists primarily of neighboring former Soviet states, whose populations have varying degrees of loyalty and ethnic ties to Russia. One way Russia has been trying to maintain a grip over its close neighborhood—or, as then-President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev described it, its "zone of privileged interests"<sup>32</sup>—is through its "compatriot policy," which uses various

means (financial, social, and cultural) to support those ethnic Russians who found themselves outside Russia's borders following the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>33</sup> Russia's uneasiness with close neighbors adopting a Western orientation has been particularly visible in Georgia and Ukraine. In the latter case, the Euromaidan revolution of 2013–2014 prompted both Russia's annexation of Crimea and its initiation of a violent conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

This policy of protecting or exerting control over ethnic Russians or Russian-speaking minorities also extends beyond Russia's immediate borders. In August 2008, Medvedev articulated five key principles of Russian foreign policy, one of which stated that "protecting the lives and dignity of our citizens, wherever they may be, is

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an unquestionable priority for our country.”<sup>34</sup> Focusing on Russian citizens points to a sphere of influence larger than the near abroad;<sup>35</sup> such countries as Estonia and Latvia, for instance, have significant Russian minority populations. The Baltic states have been wary of Russia manipulating these minorities, promoting pro-Russian views, and depicting the Estonian and Latvian states as oppressive or fascist.<sup>36</sup>

To further complicate matters, it is unclear what Russia’s redlines are in this arena. What level of ill treatment of Russian populations abroad could prompt Russia to react? What would constitute a sufficiently large loss of influence for Russia to consider it unacceptable? This uncertainty actually serves to strengthen the Russian position. Estonia, Latvia, and countries in similar situations with sizable Russian minority populations are left to guess what pretext Russia could use, and what could spark a Russian intervention on behalf of its citizens abroad. Likewise, there was little indication that the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine would prompt military action on the part of Russia. Overall, an action that Russia perceives as decisively pulling a country away from its sphere of influence might therefore be considered a redline for Moscow.

## What Do Prior Instances of Russian Escalation Tell Us About Redlines?

From a military perspective, *escalation* can be defined as “an increase in the intensity or scope of conflict.”<sup>37</sup> Escalation also encompasses the steps leading up to a conflict, when a crisis increases in intensity or scope to the point of open hostilities. The question of escalation—and means to prevent it—is particularly important in the case

of Russia because its leadership has made clear that the use of nuclear weapons is considered a valid option “in response to the use of nuclear and other mass destruction weapons against it and/or its allies, as well as in reply to a large-scale aggression with the use of conventional weapons in situations critical to the national security of the Russian Federation.”<sup>38</sup> This section identifies instances of Russian escalation in the conventional domain, as well as under the threshold of war, and examines whether those instances relate to some of the redlines highlighted previously or suggest different ones. A final section reviews two cases of Russian nonescalation despite the appearance of some redlines having been crossed.

## Russian Use of Conventional Force

We examine here key instances—Georgia in 2008, Ukraine since 2014, and Syria since 2015—when Russia engaged in combat operations outside its territory.<sup>39</sup> Why did Russia, in each case, escalate the crisis to the point of conflict, and can these decisions be traced to one of the redlines identified above?

Georgia’s “five-days war” of August 2008 was the culmination of years of tensions between Georgia, led by pro-EU President Mikheil Saakashvili, and Russia, which still had troops (officially, “peacekeepers”) in the Georgian separatist provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In April 2008, NATO announced that Georgia and Ukraine would not receive the Membership Action Plan that they had requested, but would eventually become NATO members, without giving the Ukrainian or Georgian governments further specifications on a process or a timeline. This statement was a compromise between the U.S. position, which was supportive of granting them Membership

Action Plans, and the concerns of France and Germany that such a move would be perceived by Moscow as a clear provocation.<sup>40</sup>

On August 7, 2008, Georgian forces launched an artillery attack against positions in South Ossetia's capital, Tskhinvali. Claiming that two of its peacekeepers had been killed in the attack, Russia immediately launched an offensive in South Ossetia before crossing the border with Georgia proper and advancing toward Tbilisi, the capital. Georgia and Russia disagree on the precise circumstances that led to the start of the war, with Georgia arguing that Russia had started moving offensive forces into South Ossetia prior to its attack on Tskhinvali.<sup>41</sup> The outcome of the war was largely positive for Russia, which solidified its positions in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia and made clear to Georgia that Russia could intervene at will on Georgia's territory and crush its military. Since then, Moscow has been slowly pushing the South Ossetian border farther into Georgian-controlled territory, an action described as "creeping annexation."<sup>42</sup> The apparent redlines here were the Georgian offensive in South Ossetia—in other words, an attack against a territory that Russia considered to be within its sphere of influence—and the deaths of two Russian peacekeepers. Yet these were only the proximate causes of a conflict that was, essentially, about preventing Georgia from joining NATO.<sup>43</sup> This suggests that the most important redline in this crisis had been crossed at NATO's Bucharest Summit the previous April, and Russia might have been waiting for a pretext to intervene against Georgia—and as a matter of fact, the United States had warned President Saakashvili, on different occasions, not to offer Moscow any such pretext.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, Ukraine represents an example of Russia deciding to obstruct political developments in a country that it wanted to keep in its sphere of influence. The 2013–2014 Euromaidan revolution was sparked by pro-Russian Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych's decision not to sign an Association Agreement with the EU, which Ukraine was widely expected to sign. Protests ensued, eventually leading Yanukovych to flee to Russia while a pro-EU government, led by President Petro Poroshenko, took power in Ukraine. Russia refused to recognize the new government and invaded Crimea in March 2014 before deploying its own conventional forces and sending military support to pro-Russian militias in parts of southeastern Ukraine.<sup>45</sup>

John Mearsheimer famously put the blame for Russia's military action in Crimea on the West, arguing that "the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault," because "the United States and its allies unknowingly provoked a major crisis over Ukraine" by supporting its move toward a more-liberal Western-oriented regime.<sup>46</sup> Yet it would be erroneous to claim that, back in 2014, this redline was visible and a Russian reaction on the order of magnitude of the annexation of Crimea was expected. Indeed, Russia's leaders likely did not anticipate the crossing of one of their redlines as a result of the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine, and were likely in a reactionary mode rather than implementing a predetermined strategy. Thus, Russia's takeover of Crimea is generally described as a surprise: Some Russian reaction was expected, but not of that scope and intensity.<sup>47</sup>

Russia's involvement in the war in Syria, through its direct air support to government-backed military forces, represents another example of escalation. Through its military action in Syria, Russia aimed to assert its position

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as a great power but also to forestall the fall of the regime of Syrian President—and ally of Moscow—Bashar al-Assad.<sup>48</sup> A key motivation for preserving the Syrian regime was the perception in Moscow that the fall of Assad would only increase the terrorist and radicalization threats that Russia considers a major risk to its security.<sup>49</sup> By maintaining the status quo in Damascus, Russia was also trying to prevent another Iraq or Libya. Because the Assad regime invited Russia into Syria, Russian leadership was also able to claim that its intervention was legitimate under international law, while it simultaneously condemned the West's “illegal” interference in the internal affairs of a foreign state. By decrying U.S. involvement in Syria and providing a so-called credible alternative to U.S. leadership in the region, Russia's participation in the war was designed to assert its position as a great power on which its allies can rely. Finally, an additional—and lesser<sup>50</sup>—motivation for Russia's intervention was Moscow's desire to protect its

naval and air bases in Latakia and Tartus.<sup>51</sup> It is unclear, however, whether the impending fall of a Russian ally would, in itself, prompt use of force on the part of Moscow. The Syria case combines Moscow's hostility to regime change and concern about international terrorism, particularly from Sunni Islamist groups,<sup>52</sup> and it might be that combination that prompted Russia to intervene.

### Russian Use of Gray Zone Tactics

Although the potential of a conventional war with Russia—and the associated “going nuclear” option—presents the most glaring, existential threat to the United States and NATO, Russia's actions below the threshold of full-scale war (i.e., in the “gray zone”) constitute a more subtle, long-term threat, and one that might be more difficult to deter because those actions cannot systematically be traced back to their perpetrator. Russia's recent operations in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria have demonstrated a trend of “improved operational concepts and capabilities, including denial and deception activities and unconventional warfare designed to operate below U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) response thresholds.”<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Russian aggression has largely taken the form of subversive action designed to weaken its neighbors and strain the cohesion of the NATO alliance by exacerbating intra-European divisions, undermining the sovereignty of member states, and casting doubt on the credibility of NATO defense.<sup>54</sup> These subversive gray zone actions are often difficult to attribute to Russia and are carefully calibrated not to cross U.S. or NATO redlines.<sup>55</sup> This, in turn, makes it challenging for NATO to justify invoking Article 5 (mutual defense of an alliance member). Such a response would look like NATO was disproportionately

escalating to a higher level than Russia had. In this manner, Russian actions “exploit” and “stretch” thresholds for war.<sup>56</sup>

While Russia’s escalation of crises has mostly remained under the threshold of war, it is often difficult to identify whether Russian escalatory actions were provoked by specific U.S. or NATO actions. First, Russian actions that appear escalatory—for instance, a military buildup—may be prompted by factors mostly internal to Russia. For example, the poor performance of the Russian military during the war with Georgia in 2008—rather than U.S. or NATO actions—was the catalyst for Putin’s decision to undertake a massive reform of the Russian armed forces.<sup>57</sup> To complicate matters, Putin has shown a consistent pattern of attempting to justify any hostile move by Russia by presenting it as a defensive reaction to a perceived or imagined threat or aggression from the West. For instance, Putin has repeatedly quipped that if U.S. nuclear posturing and force developments are not targeted at Russia, then his actions in the nuclear realm—such as Russia’s cruise missile and nuclear modernization—cannot be construed as being directed at the United States or NATO either.<sup>58</sup> Finally, Russian actions are frequently opportunistic, and therefore might not be in direct response to anything the United States or NATO did or did not do. This is particularly true of gray zone actions;<sup>59</sup> however, some more-conventional moves—for instance, the Georgia war in August 2008—similarly might have used Western actions as a pretext to invade Georgia.<sup>60</sup>

Bearing these caveats in mind, there are some instances of Russian gray zone actions that appear to have taken place in response to the redlines mentioned previously. One such example is the recent enlargement of NATO to Montenegro. Moscow made its concerns about

NATO enlargement clear in the run-up to Montenegro’s accession to membership in 2017, with Russia allegedly working with local pro-Russian opposition party New Serbian Democracy to organize anti-NATO protests.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, the investigation into a failed plot to seize Montenegro’s Parliament and assassinate the prime minister revealed the involvement of two Russian intelligence officers.<sup>62</sup>

Yet other Russian gray zone actions appear substantially different, suggesting—in instances in which Russian motives can be established with sufficient confidence—potential other sources of provocation beyond the redlines we identified. For instance, during the “Bronze Soldier” crisis in Estonia in 2007, Russia took issue with the planned relocation of a statue depicting a World War II-era Red Army soldier from the center of Tallinn, Estonia’s capital. Russia initiated or supported a series of retaliatory actions, including disrupting transportation and gas supplies between Russia and Estonia. Additionally, Estonian government websites experienced cyberattacks, Tallinn was the scene of violent protests, and protesters besieged the Estonian embassy in Moscow. Although the extent of Russia’s role in these actions remains unclear,<sup>63</sup> perceptions in Estonia were that Russia was the culprit.<sup>64</sup> The Estonia case would then show a Russian willingness to escalate a crisis while remaining under the threshold of war, with Moscow responding to a perceived offense against an interpretation of history favorable to Russia and its predecessor, the Soviet Union. Perceived offenses against national pride, rooted in a precise idea of how other countries should treat Russia, might therefore account for an additional redline. Although this concern relates to Russia’s core interest of being treated as a great power,<sup>65</sup> it goes beyond

this to encompass the importance of historical memory and the notion that Russia has specific values that should be defended.<sup>66</sup> This line, however, is a particularly blurry one because it is difficult to foresee which events might be perceived as offensive by Moscow and prompt a response.

Another case is the Russian response to the November 2015 downing of a Russian Su-24 bomber by the Turkish Air Force, which Ankara claimed—and Moscow denied—had strayed over its airspace. Russia’s reaction included a public diplomacy campaign against Turkey, economic sanctions, and active support to Kurdish militia—perceived by Turkey as presenting a grave threat to its stability—along the Turkish border in Syria. Tensions between the two countries remained high until Putin finally accepted Turkish official apologies in June 2016. Russia’s reaction was likely prompted by the targeting of its military assets and personnel by a foreign military power—a redline for most countries.

### Cases Where Russia Did Not Escalate

While Russia responded to the crossing of several redlines in the past, this does not mean that such reactions are automatic. Instead, there are instances when apparent redlines were crossed, but Russia did not respond. These actions likely provoked Russia, but not to the point at which it thought a reaction was warranted, given the circumstances. Two cases illustrate this point: Russia’s lack of reaction to the wave of new NATO memberships in 2004 and 2009 and to the “color revolutions” that took place in 2003–2005.

One explanation for why Russia did not react to the Baltic states—formerly part of the Soviet Union—as well as Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia joining NATO in 2004, followed by Albania and Croatia in 2009,

is that it had decided at the time on a “regrouping” strategy to focus on the areas that mattered most (Ukraine and Belarus in Europe; Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus; and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in Central Asia) and prevent these countries from joining NATO.<sup>67</sup> If this interpretation is correct, it suggests that Russia has effectively reached its bottom line for what it could abandon to NATO, and will react strongly to further NATO enlargements in its near abroad.

Russia’s likely reaction to NATO enlargement in other areas is difficult to gauge. Moscow did try to prevent Montenegro from joining the alliance, but its actions remained under the threshold for war. It is unclear whether Finland and Sweden, which are strategically located in the Baltic Sea but are not part of Russia’s proclaimed sphere of influence, would elicit a similar reaction if they were to join NATO.

Another interesting case of nonescalation refers to the “color revolutions” of the mid-2000s. Russia’s reaction to regime change in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan between 2003 and 2005 was overall relatively muted when compared with its response to Ukraine’s Euromaidan revolution in 2013–2014. Russia’s reaction at the time was mostly limited to increasing gas prices for Georgia by nearly 500 percent between 2004 and 2006,<sup>68</sup> and taking similar measures against Ukraine in 2006—a move that Kiev claimed was Russia’s retaliation for its Orange Revolution.<sup>69</sup> Because Ukraine had the same historical and military value to Russia in 2004 as it did in 2014, one explanation might be a change in perspective of the Russian leadership, which between these dates decided that cooperation with and accommodation of the West would not yield any benefits for Russia, and that a more assertive

policy was in order.<sup>70</sup> Others have similarly commented on how Russia opted for a more assertive posture with Western nations starting in the mid-2000s.<sup>71</sup> Russia was better equipped to conduct this assertive policy after years of high oil prices increased its national revenue, and a comprehensive reform effort of its armed forces improved their capabilities. This points to the limitations of using historical examples to analyze Russia's willingness to act on redlines; although the redlines may be the same, Russia's resolve for enforcing them—as well as its relative military and economic strength—may have changed over time, as seems to have been the case over the past decade. In other words, while the actions taken by Russian decisionmakers in the past may provide some indication of what might be expected in the future, they do not offer a definitive template because changing circumstances could provide Russian leaders with new opportunities or disincentives to choose escalation over restraint.<sup>72</sup>

Another reason for Russia's lack of consistency in responding to perceived threats or offenses might be due to leadership personality factors. Several authors have underlined how Putin might not be much of a strategist, being instead a good tactician able to seize opportunities and act boldly when they arise.<sup>73</sup> The participants at two workshops on Russia's involvement in Syria, organized by RAND in 2016, "were clear that Russian foreign policy is guided by near-term pragmatism—others might say opportunism—and not by long-term plans or regional designs."<sup>74</sup> If this is indeed the case, there should be limited expectations that Russia will react to crossed redlines in a consistent way. Instead, Russia will likely adapt its response to the circumstances rather than base its response on matters of principle—unless there is an overwhelming concern that

backing down from a given redline will have reputational costs.<sup>75</sup>

## Deterrence Strategies and Risks of Escalation

There are several methods of deterrence the United States and NATO could employ to counter the Russian threat, defined here as an armed attack by Russia against a NATO member. Each strategy comes with its own prospects for success and risks of escalation. This section examines three modes of deterrence—conventional, nuclear, and nonkinetic—before turning to the general risks of deterrence against Russia for the United States and its allies, and potential measures to mitigate such risks.

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## Modes of Deterrence

### Conventional Deterrence

Russia's surprise occupation of Crimea in 2014 has highlighted the importance of deploying the appropriate balance of forces to deter any further acts of aggression in the Eastern European theater. Yet while the United States and its NATO allies still have overall superiority in conventional capabilities when compared with Russia, they appear outmatched in that particular theater. The results of a series of RAND wargames revealed that NATO's current force posture in Eastern Europe is inadequate to (1) deter Russian aggression and (2) support its alliance commitments to the Baltic states in the event of a Russian attack.<sup>76</sup> Alarmingly, the games demonstrated that Russian forces could feasibly reach the capital cities of Estonia and Latvia within 36–60 hours. To avoid this scenario playing out and thereby reinforce deterrence, the researchers suggest that the United States and NATO would need an in-theater force posture of “about seven brigades—including three heavy armored brigades—adequately supported by air-power, land-based fires, and other enablers on the ground” that are prepared to fight in immediate response to a display of Russian aggression.<sup>77</sup> Although this force posture would be expensive to maintain and would not be large enough to handle a sustained fight, it could theoretically be enough to deter a full-scale war between NATO forces and Russia, without provoking Russia.

Other RAND studies on U.S. force posture have found that U.S. forward presence generally has strong deterrent effects when deployed geographically near the state or ally to be defended.<sup>78</sup> According to these studies, the deterrent power of different types of forces is linked to how mobile or permanent they are. For instance, ground forces generally

have the strongest deterrent effect because they represent a longer-term or more substantial commitment. Air power, conversely, seems to have a less-robust deterrent effect than ground forces. Although air power enables a swift response to any acts of aggression, air deployments also can be withdrawn rapidly and easily, and therefore do not create the impression of a lasting commitment to defending regional allies.<sup>79</sup> Lastly, because of their highly mobile nature, naval forces do not have a tangible deterrent effect, though they can certainly contribute to overall deterrence when combined with other forces stationed in theater.<sup>80</sup> In a similar vein, RAND researchers also found that heavier forces (e.g., armored, mechanized, artillery, and combat aviation units) are generally more effective at deterring than light forces (e.g., light infantry, airborne, and special forces), with heavy ground forces having the strongest deterrent power.<sup>81</sup> To be most effective, ground forces deployed in theater should include European NATO and U.S. troops to demonstrate the continued resolve and commitment of European NATO allies.

However, RAND researchers have also found that, under certain circumstances, enhanced force posture can actually *increase* the risks of escalation rather than prevent the outbreak of conflict. Specifically, U.S. or allied forces, deployed in the country that they were attempting to defend, were associated with an increased likelihood of militarized disputes—albeit ones remaining short of war.<sup>82</sup> This is a reminder that U.S. and NATO troops stationed inside the country or countries they are trying to protect (for instance, the Baltic states) might be perceived as a provocation to Russia.

Additionally, the presence of U.S. troops in a country made that country more susceptible to attack because U.S.

troops serve as a tempting target. Applying these findings to Russia, RAND researchers conclude that

[b]asing forces in the Baltic states may increase the deterrent effect but also may lead to the initiation of more disputes and provocations by Russia against the Baltic states. On the other hand, additional U.S. forward-based capabilities in other parts of the European theater may achieve a deterrent effect in a manner that is less confrontational.<sup>83</sup>

There has been a great deal of debate among NATO members about whether permanently stationing U.S. and NATO troops in Poland or the Baltic countries would provoke Russia. Absent a consensus, NATO leaders have maintained an “enhanced forward presence,” consisting of the rotational deployment of multinational battalions in the Baltic states and Poland and a “tailored forward presence” in Romania.<sup>84</sup> Authors of a recent RAND report assessed possible Russian reactions to proposed U.S. and NATO posture enhancements and concluded that

provided that Russian leaders continue to believe that their nuclear arsenal gives Russia an effective deterrent to any hostile NATO intentions that it may perceive, these strategic factors [such as Russian perceptions of strong U.S. and NATO capability and resolve] are likely to continue to act as a stabilizing force in Russia-NATO relations, reducing the risk of direct conflict.<sup>85</sup>

### Nuclear Deterrence

Although the risk of nuclear war between the United States and Russia may not appear to be as much of a threat as it was during the Cold War, it is still a looming possibility. As a matter of doctrine, Russia has articulated its willingness

to use nuclear weapons in response to anything it deems to be an existential threat, stating,

The Russian Federation shall reserve for itself the right to employ nuclear weapons in response to the use against it and/or its allies of nuclear and other kinds of weapons of mass destruction, as well as in the case of aggression against the Russian Federation with use of conventional weapons when the state’s very existence has been threatened.<sup>86</sup>

Against the backdrop of Russia’s violations of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the U.S. announcement that it would walk away from that treaty, as well as the earlier U.S. 2002 withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, Russia’s strategic enhancements to its nuclear forces—including changes to its intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles—appear particularly problematic.<sup>87</sup>

In this context, any changes or perceived changes in U.S. and NATO nuclear forces—such as the recent placement of missile defense systems in Eastern Europe and discussion of increasing nuclear force posture—serve to further jeopardize strategic stability with Russia.<sup>88</sup> Putin has expressed a great deal of concern about U.S. nuclear force developments, which he sees as being targeted at Russia despite U.S. assertions that the focus of its nuclear deterrence is on threats from Iran and North Korea.<sup>89</sup> Thus far, nuclear deterrence has largely rested on the strategic stability enabled by the relative parity between U.S. and Russian nuclear forces. Any shifts in this balance, coupled with the Russian belief that the United States intends to launch a nuclear attack, may spark Russian fears that it will lose its second-strike capability, increasing its incentive to strike first.<sup>90</sup> In a classic security dilemma scenario, U.S.

and NATO attempts to strengthen their defensive capabilities, particularly in the nuclear realm, may inadvertently appear to be offensive—and therefore threatening—behavior and trigger the outbreak of conventional or even nuclear war.<sup>91</sup> Given Russia’s expressed willingness to use nuclear weapons and Putin’s tendency to interpret any U.S. nuclear force developments as offensive, the United States should be careful to avoid inadvertently provoking a nuclear response from Russia while attempting to deter this exact behavior. Risks of Russian nuclear escalation might also be prompted by major changes in the balance of conventional forces. From this perspective, the ultimate risk associated with enhancing any form of U.S. or NATO military capabilities is that Russia may feel that it has to respond with a nuclear attack if it is unable to match U.S. and NATO combined conventional military strength. Therefore, enhancing and expanding capabilities, even if they are defensive in nature, may create such a strong perception of threat for Russia that it could prompt a preemptive nuclear attack.<sup>92</sup>

### Nonkinetic Deterrence

RAND work on cyberdeterrence has found that it is nearly impossible to effectively implement it for a variety of reasons, starting with the difficulty of proper attribution of attacks. Other challenges include the difficulty of posing credible threats to assets when retaliating and of defining an actionable threshold for retaliation.<sup>93</sup> In some instances, the attacker may not have any targets worth striking back. It is also impossible to disarm all potential cyberattackers, especially nonstate actors, because the number of potential adversaries is effectively limitless. An additional question is whether the government of the targeted state should always be responsible for protection and retaliation—even if the

target of the cyberattack is a nongovernmental entity—given that cyber actions can quickly escalate into interstate conflicts if not handled appropriately. Moreover, because retaliation to a cyberattack may not take the form of a cyberattack, a fight that begins in cyberspace could easily spill over into the “real” world.<sup>94</sup> While Russia has been very active in cyberspace, the United States and its NATO allies have not been able to successfully deter it from launching further attacks, nor have they been able to leverage cyber measures to deter other forms of attack outside the cyber realm.<sup>95</sup> Given the existing issues with enacting credible punishment, it is more prudent for states to focus on bolstering their cyber defenses and look to other means of deterring problematic behavior.

The use of economic and diplomatic sanctions represents another available deterrent for the United States and NATO to attempt to change Russian behavior. They have frequently employed economic sanctions and diplomatic measures—e.g., expelling diplomats or closing embassies—as punitive measures, but these have not been very successful in deterring Russian aggression.<sup>96</sup> In Europe, dependence on Russian energy and heavy Russian investment in the private sector have complicated European views on sanctions. Although most countries could survive without Russian oil and gas imports, such deals as the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline demonstrate a stark divide between diplomatic and economic stances on Russia.<sup>97</sup> In the United States, the use of sanctions legislation, such as the “Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act,” might also provide a way to deter Russian aggression through the threat of punishment, though the effectiveness of these sanctions has

not been demonstrated because they have yet to have been broadly applied to individuals and businesses.<sup>98</sup>

### General Risks of Deterrence Against a Russian Adversary

Although the United States and its allies can make every effort to send clear signals and communicate effectively with Russian leadership, there is always a risk that Russia will misinterpret U.S. and NATO actions. A variety of factors beyond the control of the deterring party—including cultural differences, cognitive biases, irrational behavior, and flawed assumptions—can cause the target state to misread or misjudge the actions of its adversary.<sup>99</sup> Domestic concerns or political constraints can also color how a state perceives and reacts to the actions of its adversary. One potent example of misperception occurred in 1983, when the Russians mistook a NATO nuclear warfare exercise called “Able Archer” as a cover for an actual nuclear strike, and nearly retaliated in kind.<sup>100</sup> Only belatedly did then-President Ronald Reagan come to the realization that

[m]any people at the top of the Soviet hierarchy were genuinely afraid of America and Americans . . . many of us in the administration took it for granted that the Russians, like ourselves, considered it unthinkable that the United States would launch a first strike against them. But . . . I began to realize that many Soviet officials feared us not only as adversaries but as potential aggressors who might hurl nuclear weapons at them in a first strike. . . .<sup>101</sup>

This incident illustrates the importance of trying to understand how the other side will interpret one’s actions and the dangers of presuming that the adversary will share the same logic and assumptions.

Moreover, Russia tends to view any defense- or security-related actions taken by the United States or NATO in the European theater as being targeted at it, regardless of the actual intent behind these actions. As one RAND report notes,

Any actions in Europe to support American operations elsewhere have been and will be observed by a Russian military more interested in us than we are in it. It is critical that operational planning take this into account and that planners and operators take steps to prevent Russia from mistaking operations and actions as unintended “signals.”<sup>102</sup>

Of course, Russia may also make such claims about perceived U.S. and NATO “aggression” with the aim of justifying its own defense- or security-related actions. Whether rooted in genuine concern over U.S. actions or political theater, the reality is that Russia frequently does not modulate its responses based on the perceived or stated U.S. intent behind its actions, but rather reacts to transgressions of its redlines irrespective of the reason behind the violation. Nonetheless, if U.S. and NATO planners fail to account for Russian sensitivities and assumptions when deciding on courses of action, seemingly minor or irrelevant actions could inadvertently trigger escalation with Russia.

Deterrence strategies must also be designed with careful consideration of the broader context and environment in which they will be applied. Because some deterrence measures take a long time to implement, the context might have changed by the time they are enacted, which can “inadvertently signal aggressive intent under changed circumstances.”<sup>103</sup> A recent example was the timing of events when NATO revealed, in May 2016, that it had installed a

missile defense site in Romania and was beginning work on a site in Poland. At the same time, NATO announced a series of unconnected posture-enhancement proposals in preparation for the approaching Warsaw Summit. The coincidence of these actions further convinced Russia that it is the intended recipient of those ballistic missile defense systems, despite U.S. assurances to the contrary. In a similar vein, multiple deterrent actions undertaken in a short time span can have the cumulative effect of crossing a red-line, even if the individual actions would not have had such a significant effect. For instance, the placement of newly developed Pershing II ballistic missiles in West Germany the same year as the Able Archer exercise drastically raised tensions and Soviet paranoia over U.S. and NATO actions, leading to the Soviet decision to raise its nuclear alert statuses and prepare for nuclear war. Policymakers therefore should “consider delaying final completion or announcements of posture enhancements that may take place during times of heightened tension and should routinely reassess posture decisions in the process of being implemented.”<sup>104</sup> Otherwise, actions that would strengthen deterrence under different circumstances may counterproductively increase the risk of escalation.

In some cases, deterrence may fail to prevent escalation because there is too great an asymmetry of stakes or interests between the parties involved. In these instances,

An enemy that perceives that its stakes are high will be willing to bear greater costs and, therefore, will be less sensitive to threats of punishment. And if that enemy believes that the threatener’s stakes are low, there may be doubt that the threatener is willing to bear the reciprocal costs of escalation or pay the political price of carrying out the threats.<sup>105</sup>

Should Russia believe it faces an existential threat from the United States or U.S. allies, it will most likely decide that the costs of *not* acting outweigh the risks associated with escalating to full-scale war. Similarly, if the Russian interest in achieving a certain objective far outweighs U.S. interests in pursuing the objective, the United States may choose to back down. Putin also has demonstrated a high level of opportunism and a willingness to use any low-cost opportunities available to expand the Russian sphere of influence, destabilize adversaries, or otherwise strengthen Russia’s position in the world order. If Putin believes the United States and NATO have a low level of interest in a particular area, he may seize the opportunity to act, calculating that he can do so without risking escalation. This may lead to a problematic pattern of probing for U.S. and NATO resolve and looking for areas of weakness to exploit. Relatedly, unpublished RAND research suggests that Putin’s appetite for risk may be high, and will remain so as long as he continues to enjoy high levels of support from Russian elites and retains the ability to sell oil and gas to other countries.<sup>106</sup>

### Measures to Mitigate the Risk of Escalation

To mitigate the risk of escalation, there are several measures that the United States and NATO could implement. First and foremost, the United States and NATO should pursue confidence-building measures, such as joint monitoring of exercises, to assuage Russian concerns. Relatedly, clear communication is key to avoid the misreading of signals and inadvertent escalation. The United States and NATO should thus maintain bilateral channels of communication with Russia. Although the potential for actual cooperation through such forums as the NATO-Russia

Council may be limited, considering that the Ukraine crisis is still ongoing, such interactions would at least provide a means of open communication that could assist with crisis management.<sup>107</sup>

In addition to not crossing Russian redlines where feasible, the United States should explicitly articulate its own redlines and the consequences for crossing these lines. Such transparency might help minimize the risk that Russia will engage in inadvertently escalatory behavior that it did not perceive to be provocative.<sup>108</sup> This information would not, however, mitigate the risks of intentional escalation on the part of Russia.

Deterrence by denial represents another way the United States can deter Russia while limiting risks of escalation. The goal of deterrence by denial is to dissuade the adversary from taking action by demonstrating that it would be impossible for the adversary to accomplish its desired outcomes, and one unpublished RAND study suggested that the best strategy to deter Russian gray zone activity would be to deny Russia the ability to achieve its objectives.<sup>109</sup> Most of NATO's options for denial tactics tailored to deterring covert activity are nonmilitary in nature and focus on enhancing intelligence, supporting civil society, and promoting a common understanding within NATO on how it should respond to hostile gray zone actions.<sup>110</sup>

Capacity-building initiatives and security force assistance in vulnerable NATO countries could also contribute to deterrence by denial strategies because they make the prospect of successfully invading the country without triggering a strong U.S. or NATO response very unlikely.

## Conclusion: What Are the Least Risky Deterrence Strategies?

As illustrated by this brief review, predicting Russian reactions to U.S. and NATO movements is a challenging exercise. Some claimed redlines have proven not to be redlines at all, while, in other cases, actions taken by the United States and its allies have triggered unexpectedly strong Russian responses. Nonetheless, there are some methods of deterrence that are less likely than others to provoke an escalatory response from Russia.

Overall, changes in force posture seem to hold the most potential for effective deterrence, if carefully calibrated to minimize the risks of provoking Russia. The results of prior RAND work suggest that U.S. heavy ground forces deployed in theater, stationed in nearby countries but not in the potential target countries themselves, are most clearly associated with deterrence. By contrast, light ground forces stationed directly in potential target

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countries are associated with a heightened risk that potential adversaries will initiate militarized disputes, though this finding does not extend to a heightened risk of full-scale war. If the generalized patterns found in these studies were to hold in the Eastern European theater,<sup>111</sup> this would suggest that NATO's current enhanced forward presence initiative in the Baltic states may increase the risk that Russia will undertake provocative military actions, such as troop mobilizations, militarized threats, or even limited cross-border clashes, though without necessarily affecting the likelihood of war. To reinforce deterrence in the future, NATO might be better served by increasing its heavy ground forces deployed in nearby countries, such as Poland or Germany, as conditions permit.

The United States should also focus on strengthening existing partnerships and alliances while treating further NATO expansion cautiously. Maintaining a cohesive, capable, and credible NATO alliance comprised of its

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Maintaining a cohesive, capable, and credible NATO alliance composed of its current members will act as a deterrent without crossing any Russian redlines.

current members will act as a deterrent without crossing any Russian redlines. The United States should focus on improving the capabilities and competency of the organization as a whole, as well as promoting higher levels of participation among current members. By expanding security cooperation programs and security force assistance with allies and partners, the United States and NATO can effectively counter global Russian influence without escalating, provided the target countries are not those Russia has defined as being within its sphere of influence.

To avoid another nuclear arms race, the United States and its NATO allies must also be cognizant of Russian sensitivity to disruptions to strategic stability. Against the backdrop of the U.S. withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty, the United States and NATO should avoid an aggressive build-up of conventional arms or capabilities that Russia might see as capable of inflicting a level of damage on its command and control infrastructure that would undermine its ability to respond, whether by conventional or nuclear means.

Finally, nonkinetic measures also might be relatively safe to implement, though past U.S. efforts to deter Russia in cyberspace or through diplomatic or economic measures have failed to achieve their objectives (as evidenced by continued Russian gray zone activity) even if those efforts did not provoke Russia into escalating further.<sup>112</sup> Deterrence by denial can represent an effective way of discouraging attacks by increasing Russia's perceptions that such attacks will be costly and ineffective. Here again, the United States can help its allies build the resilience of their networks and infrastructure, although a variety of more-sensitive measures—such as building the resilience of political systems and societies—will be best left to individual states.

## Areas for Further Research

In the course of our research, we identified a few gaps in the current RAND body of work on deterrence. First, we found that existing studies have not been able to adequately conceptualize or articulate the fault line between NATO and U.S. strategy and policy, particularly when it comes to gray zone deterrence. As an example of this, NATO does not have a nuclear deterrence strategy, whereas the United States does. This is problematic because actions to counter the Russian threat will likely involve NATO. Secondly, existing studies do not explore the relationship between deterrence postures across adversaries; for instance, how does enacting deterrence against Russia affect the ability of the United States to implement extended deterrence toward other countries (such as China) around the world? Similarly, existing studies do not examine how the sequencing of deterrent measures influences the effectiveness of deterrence operations and the risk of escalation. More specifically, the current body of work does not answer the question of whether the choice of immediate deterrent methods creates path dependencies that would limit further options for prolonged, extended deterrence. These gaps present areas for future research.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> On definitions and types of deterrence, see Michael J. Mazarr, *Understanding Deterrence*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-295-RC, 2018, pp. 2–7.
- <sup>2</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960; Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966.
- <sup>3</sup> The *madman theory* posits that a political leader might be so unpredictable that almost anything can be a provocation and prompt a violent response.
- <sup>4</sup> F. Stephen Larrabee, Stephanie Pezard, Andrew Radin, Nathan Chandler, Keith Crane, and Thomas S. Szayna, *Russia and the West After the Ukrainian Crisis: European Vulnerabilities to Russian Pressures*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1305-A, 2017, p. 13.
- <sup>5</sup> Stephanie Pezard, Andrew Radin, Thomas S. Szayna, and F. Stephen Larrabee, *European Relations with Russia: Threat Perceptions, Responses, and Strategies in the Wake of the Ukrainian Crisis*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1579-A, 2017, p. 38.
- <sup>6</sup> The primary intent of this Perspective is to synthesize the results of recent RAND research on the topics of deterrence and Russia. For this reason, we have not conducted original research of our own—such as a review of Russian-language material or interviews—beyond what was included in the examined studies.
- <sup>7</sup> Andrew Radin and Clint Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1826-OSD, 2017, p. 10.
- <sup>8</sup> Adapted from Radin and Reach, 2017, pp. 7–22.
- <sup>9</sup> On this question, see Jamie Shea, “How Did NATO Survive the Cold War? NATO’s Transformation After the Cold War from 1989 to the Present,” video, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, November 6, 2003.
- <sup>10</sup> On the deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations over that time period, see Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, N.J., and Oxford, UK, 2014.
- <sup>11</sup> Thérèse Delpech, *Nuclear Deterrence in the 21st Century: Lessons from the Cold War for a New Era of Strategic Piracy*, MG-1103-RC, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2012, p. 131; Olga Oliker, “Russia’s

New Military Doctrine: Same as the Old Doctrine, Mostly,” *Washington Post*, January 15, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> President of Russia, National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation, presidential decree 683, December 31, 2015, paragraph 106.

<sup>13</sup> Radin and Reach, 2017, pp. 39–49. See also Bryan Frederick, Matthew Povlock, Stephen Watts, Miranda Priebe, and Edward Geist, *Assessing Russian Reactions to U.S. and NATO Posture Enhancements*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1879-AF, 2017, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> Dima Adamsky, *Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy*, Institut Français de Relations Internationales, Proliferation Paper 54, November 2015, p. 19; Sophia Dimitrakopoulou and Andrew Liaropoulos, “Russia’s National Security Strategy to 2020: A Great Power in the Making?” *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Winter 2010, pp. 36–41; Olga Oliker, Christopher S. Chivvis, Keith Crane, Olesya Tkacheva, Scott Boston, *Russian Foreign Policy in Historical and Current Context: A Reassessment*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-144-A, 2015, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> On this debate, see Radin and Reach, pp. 40–41.

<sup>16</sup> Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov, cited in Greg Botelho, “NATO Formally Invites Montenegro to Join Alliance, Rankling Russia,” CNN, December 2, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Stephanie Pezard, Abbie Tingstad, Kristin Van Abel, and Scott Stephenson, *Maintaining Arctic Cooperation with Russia: Planning for Regional Change in the Far North*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1731-RC, 2017, p. 56. In practice, both countries cooperate closely with NATO. They have had an Enhanced Opportunities Partner status since the 2014 NATO Wales Summit, and they signed a memorandum of understanding on Host Nation Support with NATO that same year as well as a trilateral statement of intent with the United States on defense cooperation in May 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin quoted in Damien Sharkov, “Putin Vows Military Response to ‘Eliminate NATO Threat’ If Sweden Joins U.S.-Led Alliance,” *Newsweek*, June 2, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Dmitri V. Trenin, *Strategic Stability in the Changing World*, Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, March 2019, p. 7; Gregory D. Koblentz, *Strategic Stability in the Second Nuclear Age*, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, Council Special Report No. 71, November 2014, pp. 21–27.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Scott Boston and Dara Massicot, *The Russian Way of Warfare: A Primer*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-231-A, 2017, note 6.

<sup>21</sup> James T. Quinlivan and Olga Oliker, *Nuclear Deterrence in Europe: Russian Approaches to a New Environment and Implications for the United States*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1075-AF, 2011, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> Delpech, 2012, p. 131; Douglas Barrie, “Russia’s Revised Military Doctrine—Developments in 2014,” *Military Balance*, International Institute for Security Studies, February 12, 2015; Michael J. Mazarr, Timothy R. Heath, Scott W. Harold, Bryan Frederick, William R. Thompson, Anya Loukianova Fink, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Julia A. Thompson, *Managing the Challenge of Limited Conflict*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2540-A, forthcoming.

<sup>23</sup> See for instance Julian Isherwood, “Russia Warns Denmark Its Warships Could Become Nuclear Targets,” *Telegraph*, March 21, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Frederick, Povlock, et al., 2017, p. 43.

<sup>25</sup> Barrie, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Frederick, Povlock, et al., 2017, p. 42.

<sup>27</sup> Vladimir Dvorkin, “Preserving Strategic Stability Amid U.S.-Russian Confrontation,” Carnegie Moscow Center, February 8, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Boston and Massicot, 2017, note 6.

<sup>29</sup> Radin and Reach, 2017, pp. 69–70.

<sup>30</sup> Radin and Reach, 2017, p. 69.

<sup>31</sup> Delpech, 2012, p. 134.

<sup>32</sup> Dmitry Medvedev quoted in Quinlivan and Oliker, 2011, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> Oliker, Chivvis, et al., 2015, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Dmitry Medvedev, quoted in Quinlivan and Oliker, 2011, p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> This *sphere of influence* represents a Russian ambition and is only vaguely defined. For a useful look at what countries fit into “Russia’s desired spheres of influence,” see Radin and Reach, 2017, p. 11, Figure 2.1.

<sup>36</sup> Dmitri V. Trenin, “Russian Policies Toward the Nordic-Baltic Region,” in Robert Nurick and Magnus Nordenman, eds., *Nordic-Baltic Security in the 21st Century: The Regional Agenda and the Global Role*,

Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, September 2011, p. 49; Andrew Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1577-AF, 2017, p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> Forrest E. Morgan, Karl P. Mueller, Evan S. Medeiros, Kevin L. Pollpeter, Roger Cliff, *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-614-AF, 2008, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Russia's 2010 Military Doctrine, quoted in Delpech, 2012, p. 132.

<sup>39</sup> This section does not examine Russian use of force on its own territory, such as in the First and Second Chechen Wars (1994–1996 and 1999–2000).

<sup>40</sup> Ronald Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010, pp. 111–140; Stent, 2014, p. 167; Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2013, p. 307.

<sup>41</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, Arthur Chan, Alyssa Demus, Bryan Frederick, Alireza Nader, Stephanie Pezard, Julia A. Thompson, and Elina Treyger, *What Deters and Why: Exploring Requirements for Effective Deterrence of Interstate Aggression*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2451-A, 2018. For a thorough examination of the causes of the Russo-Georgian war, see the report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, established by the Council of the European Union and headed by Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini. Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, *Report*, Vol. 1, Council of the European Union, September 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Andrew Higgins, "In Russia's 'Frozen Zone,' a Creeping Border with Georgia," *New York Times*, October 23, 2016.

<sup>43</sup> See Asmus, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Mazarr, Chan, et al., 2018.

<sup>45</sup> See Michael Kofman, Katya Migacheva, Brian Nichiporuk, Andrew Radin, Olesya Tkacheva, Jenny Oberholtzer, *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1498, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," *Foreign Affairs*, September–October 2014.

<sup>47</sup> See, for instance, Bob Work, "The Third U.S. Offset Strategy and Its Implications for Partners and Allies," speech and roundtable for the Center for a New American Security, Washington, D.C., January 28, 2015; Kimberly Marten, "Putin's Choices: Explaining Russian Foreign Policy and Intervention in Ukraine," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 2, Summer 2015; Magnus Christiansson, *Strategic Surprise in the Ukraine Crisis: Agendas, Expectations, and Organizational Dynamics in the EU Eastern Partnership Until the Annexation of Crimea 2014*, thesis, Swedish National Defence College, Stockholm, August 2014.

<sup>48</sup> Mazarr, Heath, et al., forthcoming.

<sup>49</sup> James Sladden, Becca Wasser, Ben Connable, and Sarah Grand-Clement, *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-236-C, 2017, p. 4. See also Fiona Hill, "The Real Reason Putin Supports Assad," *Foreign Affairs*, March 25, 2013.

<sup>50</sup> Hill, 2013.

<sup>51</sup> Sladden et al., 2017, p. 5. This Perspective notes that these bases "are the only significant Russian power projection in the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East" (p. 5).

<sup>52</sup> Hill, 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Mark R. Cozad, *Strategic Warning on NATO's Eastern Flank: Pitfalls, Prospects, and Limits*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2080-AF, 2018, p. vii.

<sup>54</sup> See Andrew Radin, Alyssa Demus, and Krystyna Marcinek, *Understanding Russian Subversion Patterns, Threats, and Responses*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-331-A, forthcoming.

<sup>55</sup> See Radin, Demus, and Marcinek, forthcoming; Ben Connable, Jason H. Campbell, and Dan Madden, *Stretching and Exploiting Thresholds for High-Order War: How Russia, China, and Iran Are Eroding American Influence Using Time-Tested Measures Short of War*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1003-A, 2016, p. 20.

<sup>56</sup> Connable, Campbell, and Madden, 2016, p. 17.

<sup>57</sup> See, for instance, Carolina Vendil Pallin and Fredrik Westerlund, "Russia's War in Georgia: Lessons and Consequences," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 20, No. 2, June 2009; and Ariel Cohen and Robert E. Hamilton, *The Russian Military and the Georgia War: Lessons and Implications*, Carlisle, Pa.: Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, June 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Christopher S. Chivvis, Andrew Radin, Dara Massicot, and Clint Reach, *Strengthening Strategic Stability with Russia*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-234-OSD, 2017, p. 8; Jeffrey Lewis, “Russia’s Nuclear Paranoia Fuels Its Nuclear Propaganda,” *Foreign Policy*, August 22, 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Radin, Demus, and Marcinek, forthcoming.

<sup>60</sup> See Asmus, 2010, p. 87.

<sup>61</sup> Vera Zakem, Bill Rosenau, and Danielle Johnson, *Shining a Light on the Western Balkans: Internal Vulnerabilities and Malign Influence from Russia, Terrorism, and Transnational Organized Crime*, Arlington, Va.: Center for Naval Analyses, May 2017, p. 17.

<sup>62</sup> Emily Holland and Rebecca Friedman Lissner, “Countering Russian Influence in the Balkans,” *Lawfare Blog*, August 6, 2017.

<sup>63</sup> Linda Robinson, Todd C. Helmus, Raphael S. Cohen, Alireza Nader, Andrew Radin, Madeline Magnuson, and Katya Migacheva, *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1772, 2018, pp. 89–96; See also Radin, 2017, p. 19.

<sup>64</sup> Robinson et al., 2018, pp. 93–94.

<sup>65</sup> Radin and Reach, 2017, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Oliker, Chivvis, et al., 2015, pp. 16 and 19.

<sup>67</sup> Dmitri V. Trenin, *Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011, p. 107; cited in Radin and Reach, 2017, p. 10.

<sup>68</sup> Randall E. Newnham, “Oil, Carrots, and Sticks: Russia’s Energy Resources as a Foreign Policy Tool,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 2, July 2011. See also Olga Oliker, Keith Crane, Lowell H. Schwartz, and Catherine Yusupov, *Russian Foreign Policy: Sources and Implications*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-768-AF, 2009.

<sup>69</sup> Rawi Abdelal, “The Profits of Power: Commerce and *Realpolitik* in Eurasia,” *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2013, pp. 431–432.

<sup>70</sup> Radin and Reach, 2017, p. 69.

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<sup>72</sup> Additionally, there is no telling how the combination, over time, of minor perceived provocations—none of which would be sufficient, on their own, to justify a response from Moscow—might suddenly prompt a hostile reaction.

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## About This Perspective

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