



# A CRISIS OF DIVERGING PERSPECTIVES: U.S.-RUSSIAN RELATIONS AND THE SECURITY DILEMMA

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Aspects of the relationship between Russia and the United States can be conceptualized as a security dilemma. Each side perceives a serious threat from the other and takes countermeasures that further provoke insecurity for the adversary. Bilateral ties have deteriorated as Russia and the United States engage in political and military competition. For Russia, the major threats are America's advantage in conventional weaponry, NATO expansion, and the threat of regime change in the form of democracy promotion. For the United States, the primary security threats are Russia's emphasis on nuclear weapons modernization, its attacks on the American system of democratic government, its willingness to violate the sovereignty of neighboring states, its support for rogue actors, and the developing Russian partnership with China. The potential for conflict is greater than at any time in the past three decades, but assuming both states are acting as defensive realists, cooperation remains a possibility.

U.S.-Russian relations after the Cold War showed great promise. Russia had abandoned its empire in Eastern Europe, the country was transitioning toward a market-oriented, democratic system, and Moscow no longer presented a military threat to American security. But over the past 30 years, each period of optimism has been followed by a significant worsening of relations. The warm personal relationship between U.S. President Bill Clinton and Russian President Boris Yeltsin foundered on NATO expansion and the U.S. military intervention in the Balkans. President Vladimir Putin's initial support for the American campaign against terrorism in 2001 waned after the Bush administration invaded Iraq in 2003. Relations reached a new low with Putin's 2007 Munich Security Conference speech where he condemned American unilateralism and the hyper-use of force. The Obama administration's "reset" in U.S.-Russian relations was

severely tested by the U.S. intervention in Libya, while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's open support for the White Revolution in Russia from 2011 to 2012, Ukraine's Euromaidan uprising in 2014 and Russia's subsequent annexation of Crimea, and the U.S. imposition of sanctions all contributed to a downward spiral in relations. By 2016 a social media campaign by Russian trolls to undermine Hillary Clinton's bid for the White House stoked divisions in the American electorate and may have helped elect Donald Trump president. Regardless of how effective Russian interference was in tipping the race to Trump, Russian officials were obviously elated about Clinton's defeat — U.S. intelligence intercepts captured audio of Russian celebrations when Trump's victory was announced.<sup>1</sup>

However, Trump's victory in the election has not led to better relations. If anything, ties between Russia and the United States have worsened, to the point that many observers are referring to a

1 Adam Entous and Greg Miller, "U.S. Intercepts Capture Senior Russian Official Celebrating Trump Win," *Washington Post*, Jan. 5, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-intercepts-capture-senior-russian-officials-celebrating-trump-win/2017/01/05/d7099406-d355-11e6-9cb0-54ab630851e8\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-intercepts-capture-senior-russian-officials-celebrating-trump-win/2017/01/05/d7099406-d355-11e6-9cb0-54ab630851e8_story.html).

new Cold War.<sup>2</sup> What explains the mutual hostility and suspicion that have characterized U.S.-Russian relations over the past two decades?

Experts have advanced various explanations for the deterioration in U.S.-Russian relations, which may be divided into two broad categories. The first argues that Russia, historically aggressive and imperialistic, has returned to a pattern of confrontation under Putin. The second explanation focuses much of the blame on the United States, citing Washington's unilateral exercise of unrestrained power following the Cold War and its cavalier disregard of Russian national interests.

While each side bears some responsibility for the poor state of relations, I argue that much of the U.S.-Russian relationship constitutes a security dilemma, in which defensive actions undertaken by one side increase the other's insecurity. Russia and the United States are arguably defensive realist powers, yet few studies have analyzed the relationship as a security dilemma. The erosion of American hegemony, decline of international institutions, rejection of arms control agreements, and return of great-power rivalry all contribute to heightened uncertainties and increased potential for conflict. In short, the strategic spiral model would seem appropriate to this confrontational dynamic. Each side is fearful of the other's intentions, neither understands the security imperatives of their rival, and both engage in behavior that undermines the security of the other. Domestic political vulnerabilities contribute to international tensions, while contrasting geopolitical perspectives are a critical contextual factor shaping the security dilemma. These internal vulnerabilities and differing perspectives serve to heighten insecurity, which is then manifested in exaggerated reactions to alliance expansion, a renewed nuclear arms race to overcome missile defenses, and efforts to interfere in the other's domestic politics. While the Russian Federation is significantly different from the Soviet Union, determinants of great-power interaction remain relevant for understanding the dynamic between the two countries. War is a real possibility, but the two sides may find opportunities for cooperation and manage to avoid military conflict.

I first briefly sketch out the main arguments of the rival explanations for the deterioration in U.S.-Rus-

sian relations, then present the case for a security dilemma approach that develops the role of geography, conflicting norms, and insecurity. The next section outlines Russian reactions to U.S. security initiatives, followed by U.S. reactions to Russia's security initiatives. The subsequent two sections examine how asymmetric geographic positions and alliance politics contribute to the security dilemma. The conclusion evaluates the utility of the security dilemma approach and briefly considers the prospects for improving U.S.-Russian relations.

### Assessing Rival Explanations

Blaming Russia for the breakdown in U.S.-Russian relations has been popular among American politicians across the political spectrum — including, the late John McCain, Hillary Clinton, and John Bolton, among others. A number of foreign policy and Russia specialists have also focused on Russian actions as responsible for the downturn. They cite Putin's confrontational Munich speech of 2007, the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea and destabilizing involvement in southeastern Ukraine, the Sergei Skripal poisoning, murders of Russian journalists, informational warfare, and interference in the 2016 presidential elections as evidence that Russia is fundamentally revisionist, hostile, and aggressive toward the United States.

Some observers suggest Russian military action in Georgia and Ukraine provide proof that Putin is attempting to reestablish the czarist or Soviet empire.<sup>3</sup> Putin's 2005 statement that the collapse of the Soviet Union was "a major geopolitical disaster of the century" is taken as an indication that his goal is to reconstitute a Russian empire, or at least restore hegemony over neighboring states. Agnia Grigas argues that Russian foreign policy has increasingly sought to restore influence over the former Soviet space, especially those territories that are home to large numbers of Russian compatriots, in a form of "reimperialization."<sup>4</sup> Ingmar Oldberg agrees that Russia's aggressive actions in the Commonwealth of Independent States region, its hostile information offensive against Europe, its domestic militarism, and its ambitions in the Middle East and Arctic are evidence that Russia is a revisionist, not a status quo, power.<sup>5</sup>

2 Robert Legvold, *Return to Cold War* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016). For an argument against characterizing relations as a new Cold War, see, Andrei P. Tszygankov, *Russia and America: The Asymmetric Rivalry* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

3 Marvin Kalb, *Imperial Gamble: Putin, Ukraine, and the New Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2015); David E. McNabb, *Vladimir Putin and Russia's Imperial Revival* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

4 Agnia Grigas, *Beyond Crimea: The New Russian Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

5 Ingmar Oldberg, "Is Russia a Status Quo Power?" *UIPaper*, no. 1 (2016), published by the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/butiken/ui-paper/2016/is-russia-a-status-quo-power---io.pdf>.



Other critics are more measured. Michael McPaul, for example, acknowledges the Russian claim that after the Cold War the United States took advantage of Russia's weakness to expand NATO, bomb Serbia, invade Iraq, and provide assistance to Georgia and Ukraine. But he asserts "it is revisionism to argue that [the United States] did not embrace Moscow's new leaders."<sup>6</sup> The United States and its NATO allies, according to this interpretation, provided well-intentioned support for Russia's transition away from communism, but Putin rejected a Western-dominated liberal order in favor of nationalist authoritarianism at home and revisionist adventurism abroad. Stephen Sestanovich assesses NATO's expansion as a means to improve stability and advance American influence but dismisses Russian charges that Washington sought to militarize the continent. Dramatic reductions in U.S. and NATO forces deployed in Europe and the significant reductions in defense expenditures, he suggests, refute Moscow's claims of Western aggressive intentions.<sup>7</sup>

If Russia is indeed aggressive and expansionist, then we should expect Moscow to take advantage of most, if not all, opportunities to reestablish Russian hegemony in the former Soviet space and to build up military capabilities in excess of what is necessary to deter the United States and its NATO allies. But as we shall see, Russia has only partially followed this scenario. In policy terms, the United States would in turn respond with a show of military force and work with its allies to impose painful sanctions and condemn Russia in various international forums. This, in essence, is the approach that Washington has been following since 2014.

A second explanation places more of the blame on the United States. Stephen F. Cohen has argued that the media and much of the Washington establishment have demonized Putin and exaggerated the

authoritarian aspects of Russia's political system.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Dimitri Simes notes that the United States humiliated Russia after the Cold War by treating it as a defeated state, slighting Russia's national interests while ignoring the context and historical background behind Russian actions.<sup>9</sup> Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry place much of the blame for U.S.-Russian antagonism on ill-considered American policies that rejected the restraint exercised during the late Cold War in favor of a foreign policy that ignored Russian interests. The expansion of NATO, the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty together with the decision to deploy anti-missile systems, and disputes over pipeline routes from the Caspian region all violated the spirit of the Cold War settlement.<sup>10</sup>

**If Russia is indeed defensive and simply reacting to perceived threats from the United States and its allies, then we should expect Moscow to react only to U.S. provocations in its perceived sphere of interests and to develop only sufficient military capabilities to deter the United States and its allies. However, this expectation is only partially supported.**

Arguments that NATO's eastward expansion and the 1999 intervention in Kosovo threatened Russian security and were responsible for much of the downturn in bilateral relations echo official Russian statements.<sup>11</sup> John Mearsheimer, a leading realist scholar of international relations, suggests the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault: Any great power, faced with the expansion of a military bloc toward its borders, would react as Russia did.<sup>12</sup> As early as the mid-1990s, Michael Brown warned that admitting Eastern European nations to the alliance would be counterproductive, boosting radical nationalists

6 Michael McPaul, "Russia as It Is: A Grand Strategy for Confronting Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 4 (July/August 2018): 82–91, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2018-06-14/russia-it>.

7 Stephen Sestanovich, "Could It Have Been Otherwise?" *The American Interest* 10, no. 5 (May/June 2015): 6–15, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/04/14/could-it-have-been-otherwise/>.

8 Stephen F. Cohen, *War with Russia? From Putin & Ukraine to Trump & Russiagate* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2019).

9 Dimitri K. Simes, "Delusions About Russia," *National Interest* 163 (September/October 2019): 5–16, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/delusions-about-russia-72321>.

10 Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "The Unravelling of the Cold War Settlement," *Survival* 51, no. 6 (2009): 39–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330903461666>.

11 Putin's March 2014 address justifying the annexation of Crimea referenced Kosovo six times. "Address by President of the Russian Federation," President of Russia, March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>; Steve Gutterman, "Russia Uses 1999 NATO Bombing in Media War Over Crimea," *Reuters*, March 24, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-kosovo/russia-uses-1999-nato-bombing-in-media-war-over-crimea-idUSBREA2N0SC20140324>.

12 John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014): 77–89, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>.



and opportunists in Russia who would undermine chances for democracy and push the country toward more aggressive policies.<sup>13</sup> George Kennan, the father of containment, described NATO expansion as a “tragic mistake” and the “beginning of a new cold war.”<sup>14</sup>

Drawing on newly released archival materials, recent scholarship finds that NATO enlargement in the Clinton administration, while facilitated by Russian “missteps” (including extensive corruption and the first Chechen War), resulted more from pressure by the Central and Eastern European states and “above all” from the 1994 Republican midterm electoral victory than any military imperative.<sup>15</sup> Joshua Shiffrin demonstrates that during the German reunification negotiations the United States repeatedly offered Russia informal assurances NATO would not expand into Eastern Europe and then exploited Russian weakness to do just that.<sup>16</sup>

If Russia is indeed defensive and simply reacting to perceived threats from the United States and its allies, then we should expect Moscow to react only to U.S. provocations in its perceived sphere of interests and to develop only sufficient military capabilities to deter the United States and its allies. However, this expectation is only partially supported. The logical implications of this perspective are that a more nuanced approach acknowledging Russia as a great power with valid security concerns, especially in the former Soviet space, would ease tensions. Russian pride and honor make Kremlin leaders acutely sensitive to American actions that constrain its international status, while Washington’s anti-Russia lobby promotes fear of Russia far out of proportion to any objective threat.<sup>17</sup>

## **The Security Dilemma Argument**

Realism holds uncertainty to be a fundamental condition of the international system, a condition that, contrary to the expectations of global optimists, was not resolved with the end of the Cold War. This uncertainty and attempts by states to alleviate threats through various measures lead to the security dilemma.<sup>18</sup> Decision-makers can never fully understand the plans and intentions of the other side (the “other minds” problem), nor can they predict how weapons might be used against them, since few weapons systems are purely offensive or defensive. Each state, in enhancing its power, increases the insecurity of its rival.<sup>19</sup> A security dilemma interpretation of Russian-American relations is not solely an argument for a “blame-free” analysis, and it does not enlighten every facet of the relationship, but it does direct our attention toward distinct perceptual variables that shape policy. As Robert Jervis observed, psychological factors play a major role in the security dilemma, with perceptions and misperceptions contributing to a spiral of mutual hostility potentially leading to war.<sup>20</sup> States may develop hostile images of each other, which was clearly evident throughout the Cold War and has been the case over the past decade or more of Russian-American relations.<sup>21</sup> Under these conditions, a power imbalance on one side fuels insecurity on the other. Arms buildups and modernization programs are interpreted as aggressive rather than defensive behavior, while similar behavior on the part of the self is held to be benign.<sup>22</sup>

The complexity of Russian-American ties leads both sides to misread each other’s intentions and overreact to potential threats. Relations have been described as a “wicked problem” — that is, an ex-

13 Michael E. Brown, “The Flawed Logic of NATO Expansion,” *Survival* 37, no. 1 (1995): 34–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396339508442775>; Michael E. Brown, “Minimalist NATO: A Wise Alliance Knows When to Retrench,” *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 3 (May/June 1999): 204–18, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20049354>.

14 Thomas L. Friedman, “Foreign Affairs; Now a Word From X,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/02/opinion/foreign-affairs-now-a-word-from-x.html>.

15 M.E. Sarotte, “How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate Inside the Clinton Administration, 1993–95,” *International Security* 44, no. 1 (Summer 2019): 7–41, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00353](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00353).

16 Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, “Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion,” *International Security* 40, no. 4 (Spring 2016): 7–44, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00236](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00236).

17 Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russophobia: Anti-Russian Lobby and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin: Honor in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

18 Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167–214, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2009958>; Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Shiping Tang, “The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis,” *Security Studies* 18, no. 3 (2009): 587–623, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410903133050>.

19 Booth and Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma*, 4.

20 Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*.

21 Charles E. Ziegler, “Russian-American Relations: From Tsarism to Putin,” *International Politics* 51, no. 6 (2014): 671–92, <https://www.doi.org/10.1057/ip.2014.32>.

22 Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*, 67–76. See also, Charles L. Glaser, “The Security Dilemma Revisited,” *World Politics* 50, no. 1 (1977): 171–201, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25054031>.

tremely complex situation comparable to the period before World War I that could easily spiral into conflict.<sup>23</sup> Russian and American leaders, and publics, have powerful perceptions and beliefs that are fundamentally different. Russian political elites believe that “the purpose of U.S. policy is to cause damage to Russia,” and that Washington pursues this policy through NATO expansion, promoting color revolutions, conducting information campaigns, deploying troops in Eastern Europe, and imposing economic sanctions.<sup>24</sup> As Andrej Krickovic has argued, Russia’s internal vulnerabilities — weak institutional legitimacy, national identity issues, and contested borders — constitute a domestic dimension of the security dilemma. Authoritarian leaders fear destabilization by hostile democratic powers and affiliated nongovernmental organizations promoting change. These domestic insecurities lead to aggressive behaviors that generate fears in Washington about Russian intentions, which then lead to countermeasures.<sup>25</sup>

American officials, for their part, tend to discount or simply do not recognize the threat that democracy promotion and human rights advocacy pose to authoritarian elites. Russia can justify destabilization measures against Ukraine, the Baltic states, and other post-Soviet states, together with cyber attacks and the development of new weapons systems, as defensive measures in response to U.S. policies, but in Washington they are perceived as offensive actions threatening American interests. Leaders in Congress and the executive branch point to Russian meddling in elections, Moscow’s nuclear modernization programs, the annexation of Crimea and stoking civil war in Ukraine, support for rogue regimes in Syria and Venezuela, alignment with China, and the poisoning of Kremlin opponents in the West. Washington’s response is to attempt to change Russian behavior largely through economic sanctions, which allow the regime to blame the West for Russia’s economic troubles and stoke nationalism. Sanctions increase distrust of the United States and support Putin’s anti-Western narrative but ultimately have failed to alter Russian behavior.<sup>26</sup>

Shiping Tang’s analysis of the security dilemma provides a useful framework for analyzing the U.S.-Russian relationship. Of the eight “aspects” he identifies, three are central: “anarchy (which leads to uncertainty, fear, and the need for self-help for survival or security), a lack of malign intentions on both sides, and some accumulation of power (including offensive capabilities).”<sup>27</sup> Tang argues that a security dilemma exists only within the framework of defensive realism, based on the assumption that neither side has malign intentions, but that each is merely seeking to enhance security through various means. From this position, states have conflicts of interest that may be reconcilable or irreconcilable and may be objective or subjective. Tang singles out seven material regulators of the security dilemma: “geography, polarity, military technology (that is, the objective offense-defense balance) ... the distinguishability of offensive and defensive weapons ... asymmetric power, external actors (allies), and concentration or mixing of ethnic groups.”<sup>28</sup>

Historically, Russia’s geographic vulnerability has made establishing buffer zones critical to national security. Erosion of the buffer, as in NATO expansion eastward, is viewed by the Kremlin as a threat to vital security interests and may result in attempts to reestablish a more secure perimeter (as in Ukraine). Regarding the second regulator — polarity — Moscow has criticized the unipolar post-Cold War order as destabilizing and a threat to Russian interests. Russia’s “drifting authoritarianism” and domestic problems, however, prevent reaching a bargain with its adversaries on a new, more favorable international order.<sup>29</sup> Third, Russia is counting on recent advances in military technology to offset perceived American superiority in conventional and offensive weaponry.

Fourth, the two sides are fundamentally at odds over whether the European ballistic missile system is defensive (the U.S. and NATO position) or offensive (the Russian claim). Russian insecurity derives from American and NATO superiority in conventional weaponry, which has led Moscow to stress its nuclear and retaliatory capabilities, thereby

23 George S. Beebe, *The Russia Trap: How Our Shadow War with Russia Could Spiral into Nuclear Catastrophe* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2019).

24 Andrei A. Sushentsov and Maxim A. Suchkov, “The Nature of the Modern Crisis in U.S.-Russia Relations,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Jan. 17, 2019, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/The-Nature-of-the-Modern-Crisis-in-US-Russia-Relations-19914>.

25 Andrej Krickovic, “Catalyzing Conflict: The Internal Dimension of the Security Dilemma,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1, no. 2 (2016): 111–26, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogw002>.

26 Emma Ashford, “Not-So-Smart Sanctions: The Failure of Western Restrictions Against Russia,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 1 (January/February 2016): 114–23, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2015-12-14/not-so-smart-sanctions>.

27 Tang, “The Security Dilemma,” 595.

28 Tang, “The Security Dilemma,” 599, 620–21.

29 Andrej Krickovic and Yuval Weber, “Commitment Issues: The Syrian and Ukraine Crises as Bargaining Failures of the Post-Cold War International Order,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 65, no. 6 (2018): 373–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2017.1330660>.

fueling Western insecurity. Fifth, the United States wields asymmetrical advantage through the NATO alliance. Russia has attempted to compensate for its relatively isolated position with the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union, but neither of these constitutes a security alliance comparable to NATO. Finally, the ethnic dimension has factored into Russian aggression against Ukraine and the frozen conflicts in Moldova and Georgia. Defense of Russian compatriots could be used against NATO member states Estonia and Latvia, heightening insecurity among Washington's NATO allies.

While all seven regulators of the security dilemma are relevant to U.S.-Russian relations, geography and fundamentally contrasting geopolitical perceptions are critical and influence each nation's security beliefs and commitments.<sup>30</sup> Historically, Russian security has been shaped by its vulnerability to invasion, resulting in centuries of expansion and the creation of buffer zones to slow or deter aggressors.<sup>31</sup> Geographically, the United States has a defensive advantage comparable to that of an island nation, though treaty commitments to NATO and defense of liberal international norms have created an American perception of pervasive threats beyond the North American continent.

Russian and American leaders each believe the other side holds malign intentions and has acted aggressively (that is, attempting to change the status quo). But is that really the case? Ascertaining malign intent is no easy task. The most visible evidence comes from states' military doctrines and capabilities, though it is almost always debatable whether weapons are primarily offensive or defensive. Perceptions of necessity are predicated on the worst-case scenario, to ensure against potentially catastrophic threats. Other indications of offensive intent may be the forcible acquisition of territory, forming coalitions, or arms buildups.<sup>32</sup> In the context of anarchy and mutual mistrust, perception is more salient than objective reality.

The security dilemma does not come into play when one or both states act offensively and seek to change the status quo, but as Jervis has observed, "Few states are completely satisfied with

the status quo."<sup>33</sup> To treat satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the status quo as a dichotomous variable obscures a range of motives. Hitler's revisionism in attempting to conquer Europe was quite different from Putin's revisionism to regain control of Crimea and destabilize Ukraine. Moves perceived by one side as offensive, such as controlling buffer territories or engaging in provocative actions, may be viewed by the other actor as defensive. Jervis notes that Soviet forces were arrayed in an offensive posture in Europe, but the motive was to enhance security rather than initiate a war. He concludes that while the East-West conflict was essentially a clash of social systems, it did contain elements of the security dilemma.

After the Cold War ended, both Russia and the United States, following an initial period of uncertainty and confusion, sought to revise the European security order.<sup>34</sup> In this context, though, it would have been difficult for either actor to favor the status quo. The entire continent was in flux, and the long-term outcome of this transformation was in doubt. Deep ideological divisions no longer existed between the United States and Russia, however, and national interests moved to the fore in official calculations. Revisionism for a hegemonic United States meant expanding and consolidating liberal democratic and market economy gains resulting from the collapse of communism, a goal that encouraged NATO expansion. Revisionism for a severely weakened Moscow consisted of reestablishing spheres of interest befitting a great power along Russia's periphery and securing recognition as Washington's coequal in European affairs. Neither side may have been acting from offensive motives, but responses by each to this new and uncertain security environment in some instances led to a security dilemma spiral of mistrust.

There is some evidence that Russia is motivated by revisionist, even imperialist, goals and seeks to expand territorially beyond the gains already made in Ukraine and Georgia. There is also considerable evidence that Moscow is acting defensively and has simply exploited a limited number of opportunities to strengthen its position along the periphery. Russian history may be employed to support the claim

30 Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," 183.

31 Stephen Kotkin, "Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3 (May/June 2016): 2–9, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43946851>.

32 Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 15–18.

33 Robert Jervis, "Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?" *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 39, <https://doi.org/10.1162/15203970151032146>.

34 See, Andrey A. Sushentsov and William C. Wohlforth, "The Tragedy of US-Russian Relations: NATO Centrality and the Revisionists' Spiral," *International Politics* 57 (2020): 427–50, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00229-5>; and Michael Kofman, "Drivers of Russian Grand Strategy," *Frivard*, April 2019, <http://frivard.se/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Drivers-of-Russian-Grand-Strategy.pdf>.



for imperial expansion, or it may be used to justify Moscow's preoccupation with threats from Europe and the need for buffer zones.<sup>35</sup>

If the security dilemma approach has explanatory value, then we should observe frequent tit-for-tat responses on both sides to perceived threatening moves by the other. Russia and the United States have objective conflicts of interest, but mutual hostility in recent years has expanded the number of both real and perceived (that is, subjective) disputes and minimized the number of shared interests. If subjective conflicts of interest are perceived as irreconcilable, the potential for conflict is likely, albeit avoidable.<sup>36</sup> While it may be debatable that neither the United States nor Russia has malign intentions (a necessity for the security dilemma to operate), it is certainly the case that each side reads hostile intent into the other's actions. The following sections attempt to sort out the central perceptions on both sides shaping the security dilemma, recognizing that it is extremely difficult to assess intentions accurately.

## **U.S. Security Initiatives and Russian Reactions**

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has engaged in a number of actions that, from Moscow's perspective, could be considered militarily offensive and not benign. These include NATO expansion, installing ballistic missile defenses in Europe, invading Iraq, supporting color revolutions, and abrogating the ABM Treaty. According to Russian Chief of General Staff Valerii Gerasimov, aggressive U.S. foreign policy strategies combine global military operations and the concept of "multi-sphere battle," including democracy-promotion programs, American soft power, and Defense Department support for grassroots movements, using the "protest potential" of "fifth columns" to destabilize unfriend-

ly states.<sup>37</sup> U.S. ballistic missile defenses in Europe have proved particularly contentious.

Congressional opposition to the ABM Treaty emerged late in the 1990s, as Republicans pressured the Clinton administration to develop national missile defense systems to counter the threat from rogue states, specifically North Korea and Iraq. Clinton attempted to negotiate an agreement acceptable to the Kremlin, which was adamantly opposed to an American national missile defense system, but Republican senators dismissed the president's efforts to reassure Russia as jeopardizing U.S. security.<sup>38</sup> Congress overwhelmingly passed, and the president signed, a National Missile Defense Act in July 1999. George W. Bush entered office determined to evade the constraints of the ABM Treaty in order to defend against rogue states and terrorists and in December 2001 gave Moscow formal notice of his intention to withdraw from the treaty.<sup>39</sup> At that time, Putin asserted the decision to dissolve the treaty was a "mistake" but not one that threatened Russia's national security. In response, however, the Russian government pulled out of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START II) one day after the United States formally withdrew from the ABM Treaty.<sup>40</sup>

The Bush administration's unilateral withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2002 and American plans to deploy ground-based missile defense systems in Alaska, California, and Eastern Europe to counter Iranian missiles coincided with demonstrations of American conventional superiority in Afghanistan and Iraq and increased tensions with Russia. However, U.S. efforts at developing missile defense systems and modernization of nuclear weapons systems proceeded slowly. The Obama administration replaced the Bush plan with a more flexible version of this system — the European Phased Adaptive Approach — which is now some four years behind schedule. Although the new system likely would be ineffective against ei-

35 Alexander Lanoszka and Michael A. Hunzeker explore competing arguments for revisionist and defensive models of Russian behavior in *Conventional Deterrence and Landpower in Northeastern Europe* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, March 2019), <http://www.alexlanoszka.com/lanoszkahunzekeressi.pdf>.

36 Tang, "The Security Dilemma," 601.

37 "Valerii Gerasimov Speech to the Academy of Military Sciences," *Krasnaia zvezda*, March 4, 2019, <http://redstar.ru/vektory-razvitiya-voennoj-strategii/?attempt=1>.

38 Wade Boese, "Leaked Documents Detail U.S. ABM Strategy: GOP Says Limited NMD Plans Are Not Enough," *Arms Control Association*, May 2000, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2000-05/news/leaked-documents-detail-us-abm-strategy-gop-says-limited-nmd-plans-not-enough>.

39 Greg Thielmann, "The National Missile Defense Act of 1999," *Arms Control Association*, 2009, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2009-07/national-missile-defense-act-1999>; Elizabeth Becker and Eric Schmitt, "G.O.P. Senators Tell Clinton They Oppose Him on ABM Treaty and Defense System," *New York Times*, April 22, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/22/world/gop-senators-tell-clinton-they-oppose-him-on-abm-treaty-and-defense-system.html>.

40 "ABM Treaty: Putin Statement December 13, 2001," Department of Defense, Office of Strategic Deterrence and Capabilities, <https://www.acq.osd.mil/tc/abm/ABM-PutinDec13.htm>. The Russian Duma delayed bringing up the treaty for ratification and then rejected it after the United States left the ABM Treaty. Russia was dissatisfied with the limitations in START II, and in any case, Putin and Bush signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) in May 2002.



ther Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles or cruise missiles on submarine platforms, Putin has asserted the sites could be used for NATO cruise missile attacks against Russia.<sup>41</sup>

American withdrawal from the ABM Treaty was perceived as destabilizing by Moscow because it put Russia's nuclear deterrent at risk. In his memoirs, Robert Gates recounts that U.S.-Russian relations during the George W. Bush administration were dominated by the missile defense question,

system, and, if so, reflect a security dilemma logic. Putin referred to America's development of an anti-ballistic missile complex as "the most important defense issue" in his March 2018 speech to the Russian Federal Assembly. Earlier, Putin had called U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty simply a mistake. Now he claimed the United States was intent on taking advantage of Russian military weakness after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Putin also stated that Russian strategists were "greatly concerned" about the revised U.S. *Nuclear Posture Review*, specifically the provisions for lowering the threshold for use of nuclear weapons against a conventional or cyber attack.<sup>44</sup>

The threat to Russia from American missile defense systems and nuclear modernization programs is the potential for strategic instability. Russian officials and military analysts assert that the European anti-ballistic missile systems will

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has engaged in a number of actions that, from Moscow's perspective, could be considered militarily offensive and not benign. These include NATO expansion, installing ballistic missile defenses in Europe, invading Iraq, supporting color revolutions, and abrogating the ABM Treaty.

along with Washington's efforts to secure NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia and the Russo-Georgian War. The American goal was primarily to address the evolving threat of Iranian short- and medium-range missiles. The Eastern European allies, most notably Poland, focused on the threat from Russia and sought U.S. security guarantees. Although the European Phased Adaptive Approach generated a storm of controversy among conservative opponents of the Obama administration, it did little to allay Russian concerns.<sup>42</sup>

Russia's early efforts to develop maneuverable reentry vehicles to counteract anti-ballistic missile systems date to 1997 and 1998, with the first test conducted in 2004.<sup>43</sup> These Russian programs were possibly a response to the intensifying debate in Washington on developing an anti-ballistic missile

not be limited and will not be utilized solely against Iran as claimed. Taken together with the systems in South Korea and the western United States, Russia's retaliatory capability would be impacted, forcing Moscow to respond by enhancing its capability to overwhelm U.S. defensive systems.<sup>45</sup> Russian conventional capabilities have improved in recent years, but the provisions in Russian military doctrine suggesting a nuclear response could be employed if the very existence of the state is at risk illustrates Russia's continuing conventional weakness.<sup>46</sup> However, while Russian leaders vehemently reject the possibility that their nuclear posture might constitute an offensive threat, this "defensive" nuclear posture is perceived by U.S. and NATO security officials as "destabilizing and dangerous."<sup>47</sup>

Putin, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and other

41 Ulrich Kühn and Anna Péczli, "Russia, NATO, and the INF Treaty," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 73, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26271591>. Bush administration plans to deploy anti-ballistic missile systems in Poland and the Czech Republic were abandoned when the Obama administration created the European Phased Adaptive Approach to defend against Iranian intermediate-range missiles. See, Ian Williams, "Achilles' Heel: Adding Resilience to NATO's Fragile Missile Shield," *CSIS Brief*, Aug. 5, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/achilles-heel-adding-resilience-natos-fragile-missile-shield>.

42 Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), 159–60, 398–404.

43 From Nikolai Sokov, former Soviet nuclear negotiator and senior fellow at the Middlebury Institute. In, Dave Majumdar, "Why Russia Fears America's Missile Defenses," *National Interest*, Sept. 29, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/why-russia-fears-americas-missile-defenses-22533>.

44 Vladimir Putin, "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," President of Russia, March 1, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/statements/56957>; *Nuclear Posture Review*, U.S. Department of Defense, February 2018, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>.

45 Keir Giles with Andrew Monaghan, *European Missile Defense and Russia* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2014), 12–18, <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a607174.pdf>.

46 The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, "The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation," Dec. 25, 2014, 27, <https://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029>; Bettina Renz, *Russia's Military Renewal* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 172.

47 Alexey Arbatov, "Understanding the US-Russia Nuclear Schism," *Survival* 59, no. 2 (2017): 34, 55–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2017.1302189>.

Russian officials have frequently cited NATO expansion as another major threat to the country's security. However, as Kimberly Marten has pointed out, Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov signed the NATO-Russia Founding Act the same year the Visegrad states were admitted to NATO (1997).<sup>48</sup> Russian policy toward the vulnerable enclave of Kaliningrad also suggests that Moscow was more concerned with the Baltic states' accession to the European Union rather than NATO enlargement. Cooperative rhetoric (Kaliningrad as a "bridge") only shifted toward more confrontational discourse (Kaliningrad as a "fortress") between 2002 and 2004, coincident with the color revolutions and U.S. invasion of Iraq.<sup>49</sup> Reinforcing this timeline, attitudinal research conducted in 2001 found that while 53 percent of Russian elites held NATO expansion eastward to be a threat to national security, only 36 percent thought it was important for Russia to prevent NATO enlargement.<sup>50</sup>

By the mid-2000s the discourse had shifted to NATO as an enemy, not a partner. In his 2007 speech to the NATO security conference, Putin asserted that NATO expansion was "a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust." He condemned NATO members' refusal to ratify the Adapted Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe and the positioning of American frontline forces on Russian borders.<sup>51</sup> Russia's 2010 and 2014 military doctrines identified NATO's military build-up and the expansion of the alliance toward Russian borders as the main external military threat to the Russian Federation.<sup>52</sup>

The enlargement of NATO, together with the European Union's absorption of most Eastern European countries, weakened Moscow's position in Europe by promoting stronger, democratic states allied with the West. Weak and dysfunctional states along Russia's periphery — those mired in territorial dis-

putes or frozen conflicts — provide opportunities for Russia to exert influence. The dramatic decrease in U.S. troops stationed in Europe and the deterioration of European defense capabilities in the two decades after the end of the Cold War contradict Putin's claims of an arms race directed against Russia. Nonetheless, U.S. leaders failed to appreciate how NATO expansion was perceived in the Kremlin as a genuine security threat that required a more assertive posture along Russian borders.<sup>53</sup>

In place of the Obama administration's emphasis on international institutions and alliance structures, the Trump administration adopted a strategy of dramatically increasing military expenditures and pressuring allies to assume more of the burden for their own defense. The 2017 *National Security Strategy* claims engagement policies pursued over the past two decades — policies that sought to enmesh great-power rivals in a web of political institutions and commercial arrangements — failed to advance U.S. goals. The strategy identifies a return to great-power politics as the major security challenge for the United States.<sup>54</sup> Russia, China, rogue states Iran and North Korea, and terrorism are identified as key threats to American power, interests, and influence globally:

China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence.<sup>55</sup>

Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the 2017 U.S. security strategy as confrontational, noting the "anti-Russia proclamations scattered throughout the text" and a vision of internation-

48 Kimberly Marten, "NATO Enlargement: Evaluating its Consequences in Russia," *International Politics* 57 (2020): 401–26, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00233-9>.

49 Sergey Sukhankin, "From 'Bridge of Cooperation' to A2AD 'Bubble': The Dangerous Transformation of Kaliningrad Oblast," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 31, no. 1 (2018): 15–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2018.1416732>.

50 Leonid Kosals, "Russia's Elite Attitudes to the NATO Enlargement: Sociological Analysis," *NATO-EAPC Research Fellowship Final Report* (Moscow: 2001), <https://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/99-01/kosals.pdf>. NATO ranked fourth in perceived threats behind terrorism, low competitiveness in the global economy, and backwardness in science and technology.

51 Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," President of Russia, Feb. 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

52 "The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation," Feb. 5, 2010, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2010russia\\_militaryDoctrine.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2010russia_militaryDoctrine.pdf); "The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation," 2014, 12.

53 Andrei P. Tsygankov, "The Sources of Russia's Fear of NATO," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51, no. 2 (2018): 101–11, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2018.04.002>. Also see, Jim Goldgeier, "Promises Made, Promises Broken? What Yeltsin Was Told About NATO in 1993 and Why It Matters," *War on the Rocks*, Nov. 22, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/11/promises-made-promises-broken-what-yeltsin-was-told-about-nato-in-1993-and-why-it-matters-2/>.

54 *National Security Strategy of the United States*, The White House, December 2017, 3 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

55 *National Security Strategy*, 2.

al relations as adversarial rather than cooperative. The strategy's goals included preserving American dominance and preventing Russia (and China) from becoming major powers and was not that different from previous policies.<sup>56</sup> In his response to the strategy document's publication, presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied Russia was a threat to U.S. security and cited prospects for cooperation on terrorism. Head of the Duma international affairs committee Leonid Slutsky condemned the document as demonizing Russia and essentially continuing Barack Obama's efforts at preserving a unipolar world order.<sup>57</sup>

The 2018 *National Defense Strategy*, another key document released by the Trump administration, identifies long-term strategic competition with Russia and China as "principal priorities" for the Department of Defense:

Russia seeks veto authority over nations on its periphery in terms of their governmental, economic, and diplomatic decisions, to shatter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and change European and Middle East security and economic structures to its favor. ... China and Russia are now undermining the international order from within the system by exploiting its benefits while simultaneously undercutting its principles and "rules of the road."<sup>58</sup>

In acknowledging that all domains (land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace) are now contested, Washington echoes Moscow's view that the world is increasingly multipolar and confirms Russian claims that American primacy is slipping. By identifying Russia as a key threat to the United States and a major player in world politics, while abandoning the discourse of global liberalism, the strategy document accords well with Moscow's perception of 21st-century international politics.<sup>59</sup>

To cope with a perceived Russian threat, the United States under the Trump administration is continuing and expanding the Obama administration's

European Deterrence Initiative, rotating forces through Poland and the Baltic states, completing the European ballistic missile defense system, ramping up NATO military exercises, and modernizing the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Though ostensibly defensive in nature, these actions have been portrayed as threatening to Russia by Kremlin leaders.<sup>60</sup> Trust and communication between the two sides are at their lowest level since the end of the Cold War, compounding the problem. Russia claims the United States has demonstrated its aggressive intentions by abrogating key treaties, expanding NATO eastward in violation of its promises, and adopting confrontational (that is, offensive) security postures. The United States responds that its actions are benign and pose no real threat to Russia.

### **Russian Security Initiatives and U.S. Reactions**

Russia's nuclear and conventional modernization programs and aggressive informational warfare against the West, combined with Putin's belligerent rhetoric, have generated unease in the United States and Europe. The Russian military is undertaking an extensive modernization of all three legs of the strategic triad: land-based missiles, strategic submarines, and long-distance bombers. However, the argument that this portends a new, threatening form of Russian aggression or is the outcome of bureaucratic politics is not persuasive. Nuclear modernization is designed to ensure Russia's second-strike nuclear capability, compensate for conventional weakness, and counter the potential for a U.S. missile defense system to undermine Russia's nuclear deterrent.<sup>61</sup> Rather than change Russian behavior, U.S. reactions have worsened the conditions of the security dilemma.

In his 2018 state of the nation address, Putin asserted that the ABM and New START treaties reduced the likelihood of resorting to nuclear weapons by preserving mutual vulnerability and providing a foundation for trust in the internation-

56 "Kommentarii Departmenta informatsii i pechati MID Rossii v sviazi c novoi Strategiei natsional'noi bezopasnosti SSHA [Comments from the Russian Foreign Ministry's Department of Information and Press on the New US National Security Strategy]," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Dec. 19, 2017, [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2996962](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2996962).

57 Tom Balmforth, "What a Difference a Year Makes: Russian Lawmakers Pan Trump's Security Doctrine, Kremlin Sees Silver Lining," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Dec. 19, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-reaction-us-security-doctrine-trump-putin/28927351.html>.

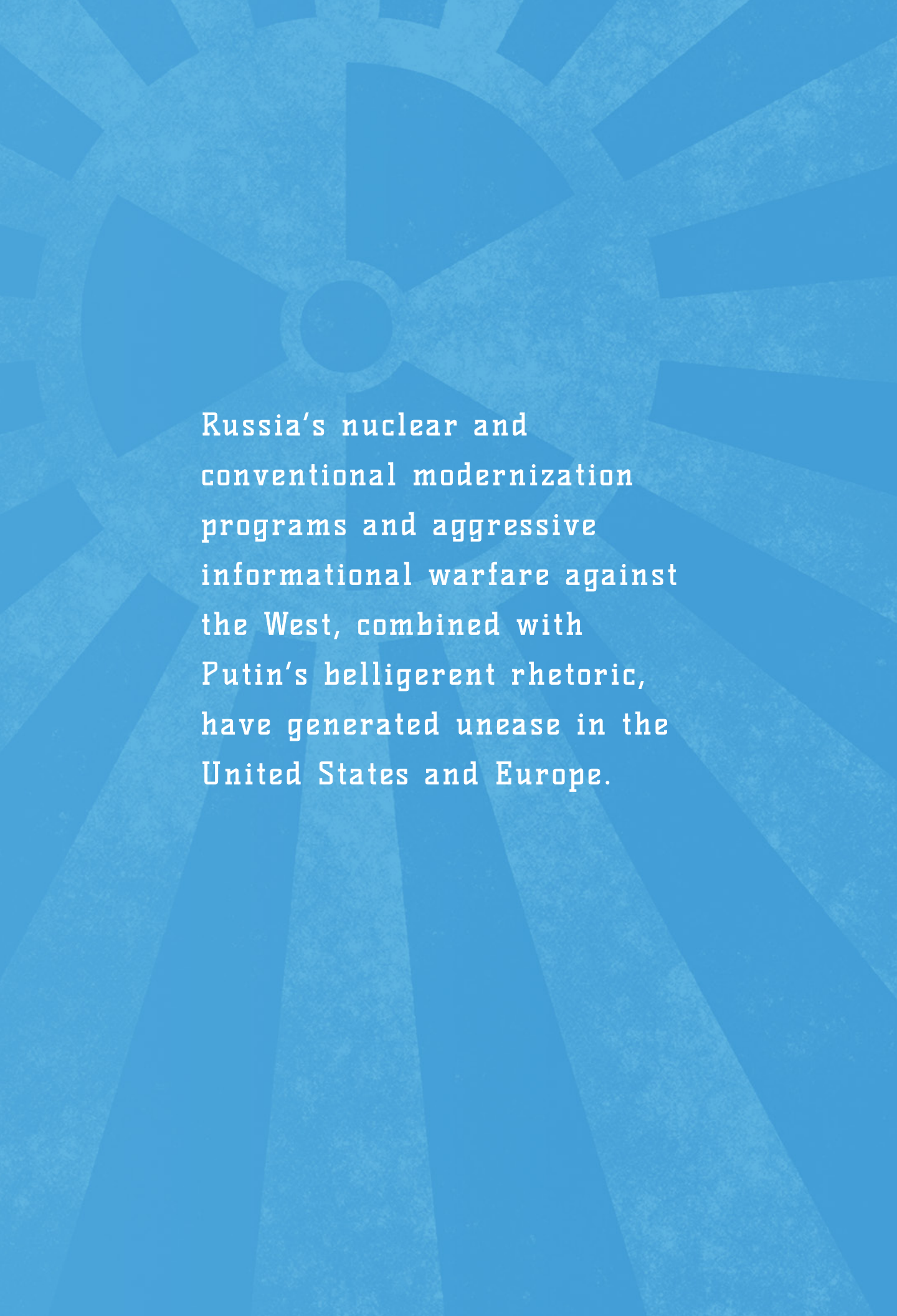
58 *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, U.S. Department of Defense, 2018, 2, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

59 Fyodor Lukyanov, "Trump's Defense Strategy is Perfect for Russia," *Washington Post*, Jan. 23, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldpost/wp/2018/01/23/national-defense-strategy/>.

60 See the remarks by Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu, "Shoigu: deistviia NATO vynuzhdaiut Rossiui prinimat' otvetnye mery dlia bezopasnosti [Shoigu: NATO's Actions Force Russia to Retaliate for the Country's Security]," *TASS*, Feb. 27, 2019, <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/6164133>.

61 Elias Götz, "Strategic Imperatives, Status Aspirations, or Domestic Interests? Explaining Russia's Nuclear Weapons Policy," *International Politics* 56 (2019): 810–27, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-018-0168-7>.



The background of the image is a solid blue color with a large, stylized sunburst or gear-like pattern. The pattern consists of a central circle with several thick, curved spokes radiating outwards, creating a sense of motion and energy.

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conventional modernization  
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al system. Putin noted that Russia tried to reengage the United States and Europe in discussions about constraining anti-ballistic missile systems and halting NATO's advance eastward, but without much success: "Nobody wanted to listen to us." After detailing the modernization of Russia's conventional and nuclear forces, Putin explained how Russia was expanding and upgrading its forces to counter American anti-ballistic missile systems deployed in Alaska, California, Eastern Europe, South Korea, and Japan, as well as on five cruisers and 30 destroyers close to Russian borders.<sup>62</sup>

Kremlin leaders have dismissed U.S. assurances that American anti-ballistic missile systems are designed to counter rogue states, insisting their emplacement will devalue Russia's nuclear deterrent potential. To overwhelm U.S. defenses, Russia is developing a new generation of missiles, including the heavy intercontinental ballistic missile Sarmat, which is more difficult to intercept than the Soviet Voevoda system it was designed to replace. Russia's defense industry is also developing new types of global-range cruise missiles and unmanned underwater vehicles that do not use ballistic trajectories and so are less likely to be intercepted. In his presentation to the Federal Assembly, Putin showed a much-publicized video of the new Sarmat missile launching multiple nuclear warheads at Florida, to enthusiastic applause from the audience. Putin also identified the hypersonic missile systems Kinzhal and Avangard, new laser weapons, the Burevestnik nuclear-powered cruise missile, and glide wing aircraft as additions to Russia's strategic inventory.<sup>63</sup>

Russia insists these new weapons systems are only for deterrence. Hypersonic cruise missiles and glide vehicles are designed to evade anti-ballistic missile systems and theoretically should preserve the deterrent capability of Russian nuclear systems. However, hypersonic vehicles can be destabilizing since they dramatically reduce the response time after a launch is detected.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, hypersonic vehicles can be used in an offensive capacity and can be fit-

ted either with conventional or nuclear warheads. Russia's deterrence strategy is more expansive than that of the United States, containing both defensive and offensive elements and employing nuclear and non-nuclear weapons, together with other military and non-military instruments, in an integrated, broad-spectrum strategy.<sup>65</sup> Moscow's nuclear programs are designed to counter American and NATO superiority in conventional weaponry and reflect a fear of U.S. technological capabilities. As noted earlier, Russia's military doctrine reserves the right to utilize nuclear weapons in the event of conventional attack against Russia when the existence of the state is threatened. Similarly, in his remarks to the 2018 Valdai Club, Putin emphasized that Russian strategic nuclear doctrine did not call for a preemptive strike, but rather a "launch on warning" posture. Russia has advanced early warning systems, Putin averred, that would allow for an immediate counterattack in the event of aggression.<sup>66</sup>

Putin has also averred that, should nuclear war break out, Russians would pursue it and would go to heaven as martyrs. The Western aggressors, by contrast, would simply perish. Putin's introduction of a messianic element into a discussion of nuclear warfare reflects a perspective that two central elements of Russian statehood are nuclear weapons and Russian Orthodoxy, combining raw power and moral righteousness.<sup>67</sup> Rejecting Western social permissiveness and moral decay, Russia has become the new bastion of Christian conservatism, or in historical terms, the Third Rome.<sup>68</sup> By fomenting a Eurasian ideological messianism to counter America's liberal messianism, Putin's rhetoric heightens tensions and contributes to a greater likelihood of conflict.

These uncertainties have contributed to an American response in kind, a classic problem of the security dilemma. In response to Russia's development of hypersonic vehicles, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency successfully lobbied for major increases in U.S. funding for hypersonic weap-

62 Putin, "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly."

63 See, Matthew Gault, "Russia's New Nuclear Missiles Squeeze Response Time," *Scientific American*, March 27, 2019, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/russias-new-nuclear-missiles-squeeze-response-time/>. In August 2019, a test of the Burevestnik cruise missile at the Nenoksa site in northern Russia resulted in the explosion of a small nuclear reactor, demonstrating the risks of nuclear-powered cruise missiles.

64 Richard H. Speier, George Nacouzi, Carrie A. Lee, and Richard M. Moore, *Hypersonic Missile Nonproliferation: Hindering the Spread of a New Class of Weapons* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017); Gault, "Russia's New Nuclear Missiles Squeeze Response Time."

65 Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "Russian Strategic Deterrence," *Survival* 58, no. 4 (2016): 7–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2016.1207945>.

66 Vladimir Putin, "Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club," President of Russia, Oct. 18, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58848>.

67 On the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the country's national security policy and nuclear weapons, see, Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, "Russian Orthodox Church and Nuclear Command and Control: A Hypothesis," *Security Studies* 28, no. 5 (2019): 1010–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1662483>.

68 Vadim Shtepa, "Privedet li padenie Tret'ego Rima k Tret'ei mirovoi voine? [Will the Fall of Third Rome Lead to World War III?]," *RKK ICDS*, Oct. 23, 2018, <https://icds.ee/ru/privedet-li-padenie-tretego-rima-k-tr/>.

ons.<sup>69</sup> The U.S. Air Force accelerated its hypersonic programs in mid-2018, awarding contracts to Lockheed Martin for the Air-Launched Rapid Response Weapon and the Hypersonic Conventional Strike Weapon. In addition, the Department of Defense is developing hypersonic boost glide technology.<sup>70</sup> Overall, the Defense Department requested \$2.6 billion for all hypersonic-related research in fiscal year 2020, though the United States is not expected to field an operational system before 2022.<sup>71</sup>

Shorter-range, “tactical” nuclear weapons are an integral part of Russia’s nuclear inventory and are critical to offsetting U.S. and NATO conventional superiority. The Department of Defense’s 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* recognized that nuclear weapons served as a deterrent in Russian strategy, but asserted that

Russia may also rely on threats of limited nuclear first use, or actual first use, to coerce us, our allies, and partners into terminating a conflict on terms favorable to Russia. Moscow apparently believes that the United States is unwilling to respond to Russian employment of tactical nuclear weapons with strategic nuclear weapons.<sup>72</sup>

Experts on Russian nuclear doctrine, however, are divided on whether Moscow has lowered its nuclear threshold (the supposed “escalate to deescalate” concept), though most acknowledge reliance on nuclear weaponry is likely to decline with conventional modernization. For example, Katarzyna Zysk argues that while Russia’s “defensive” doctrine provides for an increasing role for non-nuclear deterrence, non-strategic nuclear weapons could be used to deescalate tensions.<sup>73</sup>

Michael Kofman agrees: “From the outset, Moscow is resolved to the prospect of employing non-strategic nuclear weapons should it find itself on the losing side of a war.”<sup>74</sup> Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, in contrast, finds no evidence for an escalate-to-deescalate concept in Russian nuclear doctrine.<sup>75</sup>

While the United States has far fewer tactical nuclear weapons than does Russia, the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 2019 accidentally released (and then rescinded) a nuclear operations document that asserted that “using nuclear weapons could create conditions for decisive results and the restoration of strategic stability” during ground operations. As the document noted, “A nuclear weapon could be brought into the campaign as a result of perceived failure in a conventional campaign, potential loss of control or regime, or to escalate the conflict to sue for peace on more-favorable terms.”<sup>76</sup> This position effectively mirrors the supposed escalate to deescalate doctrine frequently attributed to Russia. Renewed emphasis by both sides on the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons to fight and win a nuclear war erodes trust and contributes to the downward spiral.<sup>77</sup>

Uncertainty generated by such actions heightens mistrust in the Kremlin and among Russian military strategists. The Trump administration’s *Nuclear Posture Review* has been described by Western experts as confusing, ambiguous, and blurring the line between nuclear and non-nuclear war,<sup>78</sup> so it is not surprising that Russian policymakers would regard U.S. intentions with suspicion and alarm. Russia’s reaction to the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* rejected the idea that Moscow was responsible for lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons. Russian planners are “deeply concerned” about apparent U.S. willingness to use nuclear weapons in ambiguous

69 The agency’s funding for Fiscal Year 2019 was projected to more than double to \$256.7 million. Matt Stroud, “Inside the Race for Hypersonic Weapons,” *The Verge*, March 6, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/3/6/17081590/hypersonic-missiles-long-range-arms-race-putin-speech>.

70 Dave Majumdar, “The U.S. Military Is Going All In on Hypersonic Weapons,” *National Interest*, Aug. 14, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/us-military-going-all-hypersonic-weapons-28767>.

71 Kelley M. Saylor, “Hypersonic Weapons: Background and Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service, July 11, 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/R45811.pdf>.

72 *Nuclear Posture Review*, U.S. Department of Defense, Feb. 2, 2018, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>.

73 Katarzyna Zysk, “Escalation and Nuclear Weapons in Russia’s Military Strategy,” *The RUSI Journal* 163, no. 2 (2018): 4–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2018.1469267>.

74 Kofman, “Drivers of Russian Grand Strategy.”

75 Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, “The Russian Rogue in the New Nuclear Posture Review,” Policy Roundtable: The Trump Administration’s Nuclear Posture Review, *Texas National Security Review*, Feb. 13, 2018, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-trump-administrations-nuclear-posture-review/>.

76 Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Nuclear Operations*, June 11, 2019, III-3, V-3, [https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp3\\_72.pdf](https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp3_72.pdf).

77 Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, “Tactical Nuclear Weapons, 2019,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 75, no. 5 (2019): 252–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2019.1654273>.

78 Seyom Brown, “The Trump Administration’s Nuclear Posture Review (NPR): In Historical Perspective,” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 1, no. 2 (2018): 268–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2018.1494092>. For an excellent extended discussion of the *Nuclear Posture Review* by six leading experts, see, “Policy Roundtable: The Trump Administration’s Nuclear Posture Review,” *Texas National Security Review*, Feb. 13, 2018, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-trump-administrations-nuclear-posture-review/>.



situations, including use of low-yield nuclear warheads and American modernization of its strategic arsenal. The Foreign Ministry criticized the “anti-Russian” and confrontational aspects of the *Nuclear Posture Review* and asserted that Russia had honored all its international treaty obligations, including the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the Budapest Memorandum, and the Open Skies Treaty.<sup>79</sup>

NATO had repeatedly raised concerns about Russia’s violation of the INF Treaty based on its development of the 9M729 cruise missile.<sup>80</sup> Trump and his advisers repeated the Obama administration’s claim that Russia was in violation of the treaty’s provisions and expressed concern that China’s intermediate-range ballistic missile deployments in the Western Pacific were not covered by the agreement.<sup>81</sup> In response, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said U.S. withdrawal would make the world more dangerous and would necessitate counter-balancing on Russia’s part.<sup>82</sup> During his October 2018 visit to Moscow, national security adviser John Bolton denied allegations that the United States was attempting to blackmail Russia over intermediate-range missiles. After meeting with Bolton, Putin threatened to take countermeasures were the United States to leave the INF Treaty and stated that any European nations hosting intermediate-range ballistic missiles would be targeted for possible retaliatory attacks.<sup>83</sup>

Russia has long been dissatisfied with the INF Treaty, seeing it as disadvantageous to Russia and benefiting NATO, since Russia was not allowed to field a ground-launched capability to counter weapons systems that neighboring states were developing.<sup>84</sup> Putin and then-Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov threatened in 2007 to withdraw from the INF Treaty unless other countries were brought into the agreement and reportedly began searching for ways out of the treaty as early as 2008.<sup>85</sup> Russia also developed its intermediate-range capabilities by deploying the Kalibr sea-launched land-attack

cruise missile starting in 2015. The missile was used later that year against the opposition in Syria’s civil war, a likely signal to Washington, and in 2019 Russian news agency TASS reported that a land-based version of the missile might be deployed in response to the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the INF Treaty.<sup>86</sup>

A number of Russia’s neighbors, including China, have deployed intermediate-range ballistic missiles that could threaten Russia, but Russia could not deploy land-based systems to counter these without being in violation of the treaty. Russia’s close strategic partnership with China makes it difficult for Moscow to cooperate with the United States to pressure Beijing into joining the INF Treaty, and Beijing has flatly refused to participate in negotiations over intermediate-range missiles. The Kremlin made no real effort to address NATO concerns about Russian treaty violations, and in August 2019 the United States and Russia formally withdrew from the treaty.

The United States finds evidence Russia is behaving offensively in violating the INF Treaty, developing destabilizing weapons systems, and advancing a risky nuclear doctrine, along with aggressive positions toward neighboring states and military support for the brutal Syrian regime. From Washington’s perspective, the United States is merely responding to Russia’s confrontational policies and bears little responsibility for Russian actions.

## Geography and Vulnerability

Russia and the United States have distinct perspectives on security vulnerability arising from their fundamentally different geographic positions. The United States, through its history, has been isolated by water and borders on weak, largely friendly states. Russia is a continental power vulnerable to land attack and in the past has suffered tremendous devastation from large, powerful neighbors. Russia has indeed adopted aggressive policies toward many

79 “Comment by the Information and Press Department on the New US Nuclear Posture Review,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Feb. 3, 2018, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3054726](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3054726).

80 “NATO and the INF Treaty,” NATO, Aug. 2, 2019, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_166100.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_166100.htm).

81 David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, “U.S. to Tell Russia It Is Leaving Landmark I.N.F. Treaty,” *New York Times*, Oct. 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/19/us/politics/russia-nuclear-arms-treaty-trump-administration.html>.

82 “Kremlin Not Welcoming Termination of INF Treaty when no Hints at New One Exist,” TASS, Oct. 23, 2018, <http://tass.com/politics/1027327>.

83 “Bolton Says U.S. not Blackmailing Russia with INF Pullout Pledge,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Oct. 22, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-russia-bolton-meeting-moscow-lavrov-putin-trump-inf-nuclear-gorbachev/29556555.html>; “Putin: Russia Will Target Nations Hosting U.S. Missiles,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Oct. 24, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-russia-target-nations-hosting-u-s-missiles/29562100.html>.

84 Vladimir Putin, “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy,” President of Russia, Feb. 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

85 Vladimir Frolov, “Russia’s Superpower Status Teeters with INF Treaty,” *Moscow Times*, Oct. 24, 2018, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/russias-superpower-status-teeters-with-inf-treaty-op-ed-63293>.

86 “Russia May Develop Land-based Kalibr Cruise Missile by End of Year — Source,” TASS, Feb. 7, 2019, <https://tass.com/defense/1043620>.



of the newly independent countries, but this confrontational posture may be partly defensive, based on a historical perception that spheres of influence and buffer zones are critical to defend the country's extensive borders and partly motivated by great-power aspirations.<sup>87</sup> The expansion of NATO frustrated expectations that the Eastern European states would serve as a neutral zone between Russia and the United States and its allies.

From its great-power perspective, Russia views the former Soviet republics as its "sphere of privileged interests," to use Dmitry Medvedev's term. According to Dmitry Trenin, "the former imperial borderlands of Russia are deemed to be both elements of its power center and a cushion to protect Russia itself from undesirable encroachments by other great powers."<sup>88</sup> Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states are central to Russian security vis-à-vis Europe. Three are members of NATO, one is aligned

with Moscow (albeit tentatively), while the last and most important, Ukraine, has been at the center of tensions with Europe and the United States. A neutral Ukraine serving as a buffer state might be acceptable to Moscow, but instead the West has used economic incentives, political support, and possible membership in NATO to encourage Kyiv to align with the United States and Europe.<sup>89</sup> Following security dilemma logic, Moscow moved quickly in 2014 to reverse the loss of Crimea, destabilize Ukraine, and preempt the possible consolidation of U.S. and E.U. influence in that key state.

Russia's military actions in Ukraine, Georgia, and elsewhere along its borders may be interpreted as imperialist — seeking to recreate a version of the Soviet empire. More persuasive is the argument that Moscow has limited security goals focused on influencing states along its periphery.<sup>90</sup> The Kremlin has not taken advantage of every oppor-

87 See, Yuri E. Federov, "Continuity and Change in Russia's Policy Toward Central and Eastern Europe," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 46, no. 3 (2013): 315–26, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2013.06.003>.

88 Dmitry Trenin, "Russia's Spheres of Interest, not Influence," *Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2009): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01636600903231089>. Medvedev's remarks were carried on several Russian TV channels on Aug. 31, 2008, shortly after the war with Georgia.

89 See, Rajan Menon and Jack Snyder, "Buffer Zones: Anachronism, Power Vacuum, or Confidence Builder?" *Review of International Studies* 43, no. 5 (2017): 962–86, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210517000122>. Their analysis suggests that the conditions for Ukraine to serve as an effective buffer state are absent.

90 Elias Götz, "Putin, the State, and War: The Causes of Russia's Near Abroad Assertion Revisited," *International Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (2017): 228–53, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viw009>.

tunity to restore influence in the former republics — when Kyrgyzstan's government asked Russia to send peacekeeping troops to stabilize the Osh region during the 2010 ethnic riots, for example, Moscow demurred.<sup>91</sup> Presumably, the costs of becoming involved in a bitter domestic conflict where the lives of Russian compatriots were not at issue outweighed the benefits.

Most policymakers in Washington fail to understand the seriousness with which Moscow views NATO enlargement, and specifically the possibility of Ukraine's admission to the alliance, since the United States has never faced similar land-based challenges to its security.<sup>92</sup> It is debatable how significant an American-influenced Ukraine would be as a security threat to Russia, but it is worth noting that the Kremlin pulled out all the stops to mobilize public opinion against the United States. As the Ukraine conflict developed between 2013 and 2014, the Russian government directed state-controlled television channels, from which Russians get the bulk of their news, to frame the situation as an American conspiracy against their country.<sup>93</sup>

Modernizing Russia's military capabilities in the European theater, efforts to expand Russian influence through the Eurasian Economic Union, creation of a Union State with Belarus, and support for break-away provinces in Moldova and Georgia are typical great-power strategies to preserve security along vulnerable borders.<sup>94</sup> Abrogation of the INF Treaty and NATO's rotational deployments in Poland and the Baltic states reassure Eastern Europeans that the allies will stand up to Russian aggression. For Moscow, however, these actions confirm that Washington's goal is to deny Russia a reasonable buffer zone needed to preserve security along its western perimeter.<sup>95</sup>

The threat of conventional or "hybrid" aggression against Eastern Europe has heightened fears of Rus-

sia, especially in Poland and the Baltic states.<sup>96</sup> The Obama administration supported its newer NATO allies through the European Reassurance Initiative, designed to enhance deterrence and improve the readiness of European forces through increased U.S. presence, exercises, training, pre-positioning, building partnership capacity, and improved infrastructure. In the last year of the Obama administration, the Defense Department requested \$3.4 billion be allocated in fiscal year 2017 for the initiative. Under Trump, the Department of Defense increased budgetary requests for the renamed European Deterrence Initiative to \$4.8 billion in fiscal year 2018 and \$6.5 billion in fiscal year 2019, but then reduced funding in fiscal year 2020 to encourage European allies to pick up more of the cost.<sup>97</sup>

While U.S. troops in the region are rotational, rather than being permanently based close to the Russian border, the enhanced NATO presence and military exercises in Eastern Europe have heightened tensions with Moscow. In May 2018, Poland requested that the United States consider permanently stationing troops in Poland, a move the Kremlin suggested would prompt countermeasures.<sup>98</sup> Tensions occasioned by Russia's continued operations against Ukraine, and the NATO buildup on Russia's western border, are heightened by joint military exercises conducted by both sides. NATO analysts have criticized Russian exercises as lacking transparency and claim they are not conducted in accordance with Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Vienna Document requirements on prior notifications, and therefore are destabilizing.<sup>99</sup> The scale of such exercises has expanded since Trump took office.

In September 2017, Russia conducted the Zapad (West) exercises in its Western Military District with Belarus, reporting numbers just below the

91 Michael Schwirtz, "Kyrgyzstan Seeks Russian Help to Quell Unrest," *New York Times*, June 12, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/13/world/asia/13kyrgyz.html>.

92 For a range of Western perspectives on the motivations behind Russian actions in Ukraine, see the special issue of *Contemporary Politics*: "Russia, the West, and the Ukraine Crisis," 22, no. 3 (2016), <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ccpo20/22/3>.

93 Denis Volkov, "Anti-American Sentiment in Post-Soviet Russia: Dynamics and Contemporary Characteristics," *Russian Politics and Law* 56, nos. 1–2 (2018): 119–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611940.2018.1686923>.

94 Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault."

95 See, Federov, "Continuity and Change in Russia's policy Toward Central and Eastern Europe"; Tsygankov, "The Sources of Russia's Fear of NATO."

96 For a critique of the "hybrid warfare" concept, see, Bettina Renz, "Russia and 'Hybrid Warfare,'" *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): 283–300, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201316>. The Russian perspective, ironically, is derived from its interpretation of Western strategy.

97 Jen Judson, "Funding to Deter Russia Reaches \$6.5B in FY19 Defense Budget Request," *Defense News*, Feb. 12, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/land/2018/02/12/funding-to-deter-russia-reaches-65b-in-fy19-defense-budget-request/>; Paul D. Shinkman, "Trump Proposes Cutting Key Fund to Deter Russian Aggression," *U.S. News & World Report*, March 12, 2019, <https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2019-03-12/trump-proposes-cutting-key-fund-to-deter-russian-aggression>.

98 "Kremlin Says U.S. Military Presence in Poland Would Undermine European Stability," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 30, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kremlin-says-us-military-presence-poland-undermine-european-stability/29258405.html>.

99 Dave Johnson, "ZAPAD 2017 and Euro-Atlantic Security," *NATO Review*, Dec. 14, 2017, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2017/also-in-2017/zapad-2017-and-euro-atlantic-security-military-exercise-strategic-russia/EN/index.htm>.



13,000-force threshold that would have required it to permit foreign observers.<sup>100</sup> NATO officials were well aware that Russia had conducted a large exercise (Kavkaz in 2008) just prior to the Georgian war and so were on high alert.<sup>101</sup> In turn, military exercises led by the United States have generated alarmism in Moscow. During the Saber Strike maneuvers in Poland and the Baltic states in June 2018, 18,000 troops practiced rapid response training to counter hypothetical aggression from the East. Russia condemned the operation as undermining stability on the continent and countered with a fake blog account and doctored photo claiming a child was killed during the exercises.<sup>102</sup> The Kremlin was even more incensed when, in October 2018, NATO conducted the largest military exercise since the Cold War, Trident Juncture, with 50,000 troops from 31 nations (including non-members Finland and Sweden) participating in maneuvers in Norway, the Baltic Sea, and the North Atlantic. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu warned that NATO's exercise was simulating offensive military action against Russia.<sup>103</sup>

Other factors contribute to the sense of uncertainty. Given Trump's frequent criticisms of NATO allies, the Russian leadership might suspect the U.S. president would not honor Article 5 of the treaty and respond militarily to a Russian incursion in the Baltic states. Putin may be willing to gamble on NATO's unwillingness to counter Russian adventurism in the Baltic region and thereby risk precipitating a nuclear war. According to one Russian analyst, Moscow's leaders are confident in their ability to win a nuclear conflict, so the question for the West is whether the costs in blood and treasure of defending these small, distant nations can really be justified.<sup>104</sup> More realistically, any Baltic conflict is likely to follow a version of the Ukraine scenario, with Moscow intervening indirectly (and defensively, from the Russian perspective) to protect threatened Russian compatriots.

Russia further complicates NATO calculations by employing cyber attacks and disinformation that present the alliance with a dilemma of either overre-

acting and risking war or doing nothing and demonstrating the organization's impotence. Moscow's asymmetric approach derives from its relatively weak conventional capabilities and the absence of useful allies in Europe to balance against NATO.

To summarize, Russia's geographically vulnerable position makes political developments in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus far more salient to Russia's security than to America's. Efforts by the United States and Europe to promote democracy and, by extension, consolidate Western influence in Eastern Europe erode the buffer zone and (from Moscow's perspective) threaten Russian security. Russia's actions in the "near abroad" have been aggressive. Its goals, however, appear to fall short of reestablishing imperial control over former Soviet space. The U.S. and European response, consisting of military exercises, limited troop deployments, economic sanctions, and political support for Russia's enemies, increases Russia's sense of vulnerability and leads to responses in kind.

### **Alliance Politics and the Security Dilemma**

Theoretically, states form alliances in a multipolar world to balance powerful adversaries and enhance their security.<sup>105</sup> But in a unipolar environment, states may have few options in forming alliances to balance a competitor. In a unipolar world, the rationale for alliances is much weaker, and the incentives among weaker members to free-ride and to draw the dominant power into situations where it has few or no vital interests (the moral hazard problem) are great. As the Soviet Union collapsed, NATO expanded from 16 alliance members in 1991 to the present 29, and the organization decided to go out-of-area. The security rationale became less focused but still was perceived in Moscow as a threat to Russian interests.

When the Warsaw Pact collapsed, the alliance decision to preserve NATO, expand its membership,

100 Johnson cites Western estimates of 60,000–70,000 troops participating in the Zapad exercise. Keir Giles suggests the media, NATO officials, and some military analysts greatly exaggerated the number of Russian forces involved in Zapad-2017. Keir Giles, "Russia Hit Multiple Targets with Zapad-2017," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Jan. 25, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/25/russia-hit-multiple-targets-with-zapad-2017-pub-75278>.

101 Johnson, "ZAPAD 2017." Giles assessed the exercises as defensive, not offensive: "Zapad-2017 practiced countermeasures for two of Russia's perceived greatest vulnerabilities: protection of its border regions and prevention of hostile actors exploiting fissures in Russian society or in the alliance with Belarus." See, Giles, "Russia Hit Multiple Targets with Zapad-2017."

102 Eric Schmitt, "In Eastern Europe, U.S. Military Girds Against Russian Might and Manipulation," *New York Times*, June 27, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/27/us/politics/american-allies-russia-baltics-poland-hybrid-warfare.html>.

103 David Brennan, "Russia Furious as NATO Launches 31-Nation Military Exercise in Largest Drill Since Cold War," *Newsweek*, Oct. 25, 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-furious-nato-launches-31-nation-military-exercise-largest-drill-cold-1186904>.

104 Andrei Piontkovskii, "Khotiat li Russkie iadernoi voyny? [Do the Russians Want Nuclear War?]," *Kasparov.ru*, Nov. 16, 2018, <http://www.kasparov.ru/material.php?id=5BEF2845504AC>.

105 Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (1984): 461–95, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2010183>.

and go out-of-area violated Moscow's expectations that the United States would reciprocate Russia's cooperative moves. In security dilemma terms, the United States defected, and the unipolar order excluded the possibility of Russia restoring a comparable alliance to balance NATO. At various points

with Foreign Minister Lavrov praising Belarus for its support in the U.N. General Assembly on issues relating to Crimea, Syria, and Georgia.<sup>107</sup> Putin has expressed support for the beleaguered dictator in the wake of widespread protests against manipulation of the 2020 presidential election.<sup>108</sup>

## Russia's isolated position has also led the Kremlin to emphasize ties with "rogue regimes" including Syria, Iran, and Venezuela. These states are hostile to America and can be counted on to support Russian initiatives.

Mikhail Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin all expressed interest in joining NATO within a revised European security framework, but that option was not seriously considered in Brussels or Washington.

With so few reliable allies in Europe, eroding NATO unity has become a key goal for enhancing Russian security. The deployment of additional NATO forces in northern Europe has led Russia to prioritize its foreign policy and defense relationship with Belarus, the last authoritarian state in Europe and a dubious ally at best. Belarus and Russia are joined in a Union State, and Belarus is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union and Collective Security Treaty Organization, but President Alexander Lukashenko maintains his country's independence by balancing between Russia and the West.<sup>106</sup> Lukashenko refused Russia's request for a Russian air base in 2013, conducted joint military exercises with the Chinese in 2015, and in 2019 sought to purchase U.S. crude oil in an attempt to reduce dependence on Russia. Considering the poor performance of the Eurasian Economic Union and Moscow's obvious attempt to dominate the organization, Belarus has kept channels open to the European Union and the United States. Moscow has played down differences, however,

Russia's isolated position has also led the Kremlin to emphasize ties with "rogue regimes" including Syria, Iran, and Venezuela. These states are hostile to America and can be counted on to support Russian initiatives. These bilateral relationships are not alliances, but they do allow the Kremlin to exercise influence beyond Russia's immediate borders. Moscow's support for these regimes complicates American foreign policy and reinforces the perception of Russia as a spoiler in global politics.

To the east, Russia has discovered a far more important partner in China. Much of Russia's pivot toward Asia can be explained by the hostile European environment, the Kremlin's interest in constraining American power, and the need to legitimize Kremlin rule by affirming Russia's great-power status.<sup>109</sup> On virtually all indicators, the United States remains the world's most powerful country, but China ranks second on many measures. Russia is the equal of the United States (and China's superior) only in nuclear weapons. On all other dimensions, especially economic and demographic, it operates from a position of weakness. Russia's "strategic partnership" with China is clearly directed against the United States and presents significant challenges to Washington. Under the Trump administration, the Russo-Chinese partnership has strengthened, notwithstanding the president's conciliatory rhetoric toward Moscow.<sup>110</sup>

The Chinese-Russian relationship is not a formal alliance, and while the two countries may engage in a form of balancing against the dominant power, they also hedge against each other in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>111</sup> However, policymakers in Washington remain nervous about close military cooperation between

106 See, Ryhor Astapenia and Dzmitry Balkunets, *Belarus-Russia Relations After the Ukraine Conflict* (Minsk/London: Ostrogorski Centre, 2016), <https://belarusdigest.com/papers/belarus-russia-relations.pdf>; Todd Prince, "Belarus's Lukashenko, Weary of Russia Union, Seeks to Buy U.S. Crude," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Aug. 23, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-lukashenko-us-oil-purchase-russia-reliance/30124113.html>.

107 "Lavrov: NATO's Military Build-up Near Russia's Borders Requires Special Attention," TASS, June 19, 2018, <http://tass.com/politics/1010185>.

108 Andrew Higgins, "Embattled Belarus Strongman Travels to Russia to Seek Help from Putin," *New York Times*, Sept. 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/14/world/europe/belarus-russia-lukashenko-putin.html>.

109 On this, see, Jeanne L. Wilson, "Russia's Relationship with China: the Role of Domestic and Ideational Factors," *International Politics* 56 (2019): 778–94, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-018-0167-8>.

110 See, Richard J. Ellings and Robert Sutter, eds., *Axis of Authoritarians: Implications of China-Russia Cooperation* (Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2018).

111 See, Alexander Korolev, "Systemic Balancing and Regional Hedging: China-Russia Relations," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 9, no. 4 (2016): 375–97, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pow013>.

Moscow and Beijing. As relations between the United States and Russia, and those between the United States and China, have deteriorated, the Russian-Chinese defense relationship has become more openly directed against American military hegemony in Eastern Europe and the Western Pacific, respectively. Russian-Chinese military cooperation consists of arms sales,<sup>112</sup> joint military exercises, and anti-terrorism coordination through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Russia's military modernization program has led to an expansion of offensive and defensive capabilities in the western and southern military districts, while China's ballistic missile build-up, the development of attack submarines, and the island construction activities in the South China Sea constrain the U.S. Navy's ability to maneuver in the Western Pacific.<sup>113</sup>

As noted earlier, the United States faces joint opposition from Russia and China to U.S. deployment of anti-ballistic missile systems in Eastern Europe and East Asia. Russia and China see the potential for regionally based anti-ballistic missile systems, together with those located in the United States, as an "interlinked global defensive network" that would erode their strategic deterrents.<sup>114</sup> This is especially threatening given the *Nuclear Posture Review's* emphasis on technological development and blurring the distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons.<sup>115</sup> Since the American position threatens the strategic deterrents of both Russia and China, the administration's nuclear posture is another factor pushing Russia and China closer together.

In addition to its vital partnership with China, Russia is hedging in Asia by developing ties with India, Japan, South Korea, Pakistan, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Russian analysts assert that the global order is changing and the West is losing its five-century dominance of global affairs. Since the United States failed to subordinate Russia and China as junior partners within the liberal international order, it is now returning to a policy of containment, trying to force countries to take sides in a new bipolar order through the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy.<sup>116</sup> The United States considers Russia

a "revitalized malign actor" in the Indo-Pacific, one that is using economic, diplomatic, and military instruments to reestablish presence and influence lost after the collapse of communism. In addition, Russia frequently collaborates with China to oppose the United States in the U.N. Security Council, promoting a multilateral world order that will weaken the United States and reduce its global influence.<sup>117</sup>

Rhetoric notwithstanding, the United States remains dominant in global politics in large part through the hub-and-spoke system of alliances in the Indo-Pacific and through an enlarged NATO in Europe. Alliances are one means by which states augment their power, but the current alliance structure favors only the United States. Russia is severely disadvantaged on this dimension. The United States is in a far stronger position, despite tensions within NATO over burden sharing and uncertainty regarding U.S. willingness to defend small and distant members of the alliance. Moscow perceives NATO as a security threat, or at least claims to — and not without reason. Russia cannot balance NATO and the United States through a roughly equal alliance, as it did during the Cold War, and so must resort to asymmetric measures that are threatening to NATO's small Eastern European members. Actions on both sides feed into the security dilemma.

## **Conclusion**

If a broad security dilemma approach has value for explaining the downward spiral in Russian-American relations, we should expect tit-for-tat responses to initiatives in the political, military, and alliance realms. We can never be certain that any given action provokes a reaction, but the evidence presented here suggests that in certain cases the security dilemma was operating. In others, the utility of the approach is less apparent.

First, the evidence suggests that NATO expansion did not pose a direct military threat to Russia. U.S. and European troop deployments and military spending declined dramatically from 1990 through

112 From 2000 to 2019, Russia supplied more weapons to China (just over \$30 billion worth) than any other country except India (just under \$35 billion). Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Importer/Exporter TIV Tables, <http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/values.php>.

113 Charles Dick, *Russian Ground Forces Posture Towards the West* (London: Chatham House, 2019), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/russian-ground-forces-posture-towards-west>; Richard Weitz, "Growing China-Russia Military Relations: Implications and Opportunities for U.S. Policy," in *Axis of Authoritarians*, ed. Richard J. Ellings and Robert Sutter (Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2018).

114 Weitz, "Growing China-Russia Military Relations," 85–86.

115 Beebe, *The Russia Trap*, 110–13.

116 Sergei Karaganov and Dmitry Suslov, "A New World Order: A View from Russia," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Oct. 4, 2018, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/A-new-world-order-A-view-from-Russia--19782>.

117 *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, U.S. Department of Defense, June 1, 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>, 11–12.



2015.<sup>118</sup> Instead, enlargement symbolized Russian weakness, practically eliminated a historical buffer zone, demonstrated Russia's inability to control events along its borders, and dismissed Russia's interests as a great power. NATO's involvement in the Balkans and U.S. efforts to secure alliance membership for Georgia and Ukraine were justified by the United States as attempts to enhance European security. For Moscow, these actions were offensive in nature, directed against vital Russian interests, resulting in the Kremlin's use of military force against both countries.

Second, conventional vulnerability, combined with American anti-ballistic missile complexes deployed and planned in Eastern Europe, led Russia to cheat on the INF Treaty and develop new strategic weapons more capable of negating American ballistic missile defenses. Two decades of military budget increases under Putin supported conventional and nuclear modernization.<sup>119</sup> These increases can be explained as defensive sufficiency (simply catching up after the massive declines of the 1990s), or as positioning Russia for offensive regional operations. The Trump administration, like its predecessor, has interpreted these Russian strategic advances as aggressive and has greatly accelerated America's nuclear program while renouncing arms control agreements, continuing the cycle of strategic modernization and heightening mistrust.<sup>120</sup>

Third, U.S. support for color revolutions, the Arab Spring uprisings, and Russia's White Revolution would not generally be considered an offensive military threat and so would seem not to relate to the security dilemma. Russia's concept of full-spectrum warfare, however, holds support for popular uprisings to be an existential threat to allies and to Putin's authoritarian regime. Here, Russian responses to U.S. actions are clear — Moscow has taken a range of actions to contain political threats to Russia and its

partners. For the United States, Russia's interference in U.S. elections and attacks on the American system of democratic government, Moscow's willingness to violate the sovereignty of neighboring states and its disinformation campaign are viewed as offensive threats — an attempt to destabilize Western societies and compensate for inferior kinetic capabilities. But these measures can also be viewed as defensive, as asserted by Russia's Ministry of Defense, based on the perception that the West is using information technology (liberal democratic propaganda) as a component of its military strategy.<sup>121</sup>

Finally, the two sides have occasionally found various avenues for cooperation. The downward spiral in relations has been interrupted at various points — after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, early in the Obama reset, and during the surge in Afghanistan. At times, Russia and the United States find they have common interests, but the level of distrust and hostility precludes cooperation in many areas.

U.S.-Russian relations exhibited remarkable continuity from the second half of Obama's administration through Trump's first term. The two sides reduced channels of communication, trust remained very low, and each side interpreted the other's behavior as aggressive and threatening. Reflexive anti-Russian positions are evident on both sides of the American political spectrum, while Russian elites have become uniformly anti-American in the Putin era.<sup>122</sup> In short, the two countries appear to be engaged in a downward spiral arising from a security dilemma, where each side perceives a serious threat from the other and takes countermeasures that further provoke insecurity within the adversary.

The security dilemma argument is predicated on defensive realism, the assumption that states are seeking sufficiency in capabilities to deal with threats rather than the clear superiority argued by offensive realists.<sup>123</sup> If this approach is correct, and assuming

118 See, Marten, "NATO Enlargement: Evaluating its Consequences in Russia."

119 Russia's military budget increased from \$48 billion in 2008 to \$82.6 billion in 2016, and then declined to \$66.5 billion in 2017 and \$61.4 billion in 2018. Spending in 2019 increased to \$65.1 billion (in constant 2018 U.S. dollars). Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Military Expenditure Database, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2020/russias-military-spending-frequently-asked-questions>. Michael Kofman and Richard Connolly argue that Russia's actual expenditures are much higher — in the range of \$150 billion to \$180 billion annually from 2014 to 2018 when calculated in purchasing power parity. Michael Kofman and Richard Connolly, "Why Russian Military Expenditure Is much Higher than Commonly Understood (as Is China's)," *War on the Rocks*, Dec. 16, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/why-russian-military-expenditure-is-much-higher-than-commonly-understood-as-is-chinas/>. Even the higher estimate puts Russian spending at about one-fourth that of the United States.

120 Dmitri Trenin, "Russian Views of US Nuclear Modernization," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 75, no. 1 (2019): 14–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2019.1555991>.

121 "Kontseptual'nye vzglyady na deiatel'nost' vooruzhennykh sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii v informatsionnom prostranstve" [Conceptual Views on the Activities of the Russian Federation Armed Forces in Information Space], Russian Federation Ministry of Defense, 2011, <http://www.pircenter.org/media/content/files/9/13480921870.pdf>.

122 Emma Ashford, "How Reflexive Hostility to Russia Harms U.S. Interests," *Foreign Affairs*, April 20, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2018-04-20/how-reflexive-hostility-russia-harms-us-interests>; Sharon Werning Rivera and James D. Bryan, "Understanding the Sources of Anti-Americanism in the Russian Elite," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, nos. 5–6 (2019): 376–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1662194>.

123 Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma."

neither side is acting as a greedy power, then tensions in U.S.-Russian relations can be lowered through measures designed to reduce uncertainty and build trust.<sup>124</sup> Russia's behavior since the end of the Cold War suggests that it clearly perceives the West — specifically the United States — as a threat. The United States is far superior in conventional weapons, boasts considerably more (and more reliable) allies, and has frequently acted without restraint in its dealings with Russia and other countries. At the same time, Russian behavior under Putin has been highly aggressive, threatening to its neighbors, and is frequently outside the boundaries of international law.

Historically, Russian grand strategy has alternated between imperialism and defensiveness, shaped by a combination of perceived vulnerability of the homeland and opportunities for expansion along the periphery.<sup>125</sup> Soviet foreign policy followed much the same pattern of expansion and coexistence, as one leading scholar described it.<sup>126</sup> U.S. policies since 1992 have been largely indifferent to, or ignorant of, the historical context — the destruction visited on Russia in the 20th century — and Russian leaders perceive the West as taking advantage of Russian weakness. Policymakers in Washington mistakenly assumed that the expansion of friendly democratic states along Russia's periphery and their incorporation into NATO would enhance American security without threatening Russian interests. Moscow's response, in the form of military intervention in the “near abroad,” informational warfare against the United States and its allies, and a program of weapons modernization, was viewed as the aggressive behavior typical of a revanchist authoritarian regime. Washington responded by deploying forces to Eastern Europe, imposing a wide range of sanctions, and ratcheting up its already formidable military machine.

How, then, can the two countries slow or reverse the escalatory logic of the security dilemma? One obvious first step would be to increase diplomatic and military-to-military communication and to have more frequent consultations within the NATO-Russia Council to improve trust and reduce the possibility of an accidental engagement. More transparency is needed — especially by Russia — during military exercises. Each side needs to reas-

sure the other that its intentions are purely defensive, although given the level of mutual suspicion that may prove difficult to accomplish.

Second, reaching a settlement on Ukraine would be a major step forward. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has indicated a willingness to talk with Moscow, and the Russian public appears to be increasingly weary of the conflict. One possibility would be to grant some form of autonomy to Donetsk and Luhansk in exchange for an end to hostilities and territorial and security guarantees for Kyiv, followed by the deployment of a multilateral peacekeeping force. The United States cannot and should not accept Russian sovereignty over Crimea. But restoring the peninsula to Ukrainian control is highly unlikely in the near future. Treating Ukraine as a *de facto* buffer zone between Russia and Europe may be controversial, but a solution along these lines could reassure Russia and lower tensions.<sup>127</sup> Such an arrangement would likely involve taking NATO membership off the table for Ukraine (and for Georgia), although NATO should at the same time reaffirm clear support for the security and territorial integrity of its current members.

Third, the two sides need to ratchet back their interference in each other's internal affairs. Russian meddling in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections and its use of information warfare against the United States and its allies has contributed to the high levels of distrust and suspicion. The United States could, and should, continue to voice support for democratic ideals and is justified in criticizing authoritarian governments, but Washington should curtail active attempts at regime change. In any event, Western support for color revolution-style popular uprisings has waned as the results have proved mixed at best.

Fourth, an arms race involving a new generation of weapons is highly destabilizing. The INF Treaty may be dead, but Russia and the United States should agree to extend the New START Treaty, which expires in February 2021. Equally important, they should begin negotiations on limiting the development and deployment of potentially destabilizing hypersonic and stealth weapons, and tactical nuclear systems, which could be incorporated under an expanded New START agreement. Since Russian and Chinese nuclear hypersonic programs are more ad-

124 See, Charles L. Glaser, “Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models,” *World Politics* 44, no. 4 (1992): 497–538, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2010486>.


125 On the history of Russia's grand strategy, see, William C. Fuller Jr., *Strategy and Power in Russia 1600-1914* (New York: Free Press, 1992); John P. LeDonne, *The Grand Strategy of the Russian Empire, 1650-1831* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

126 Adam B. Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence: Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-1973*, 2nd ed. (New York: Praeger, 1974).

127 See, Thomas Graham, Rajan Menon, and Jack Snyder, “Ukraine Between Russia and the West: Buffer or Flashpoint?” *World Policy Journal* 34, no. 1 (2017): 107–18, <https://doi.org/10.1215/07402775-3903592>.



vanced than those of the United States, Washington would benefit by limiting these systems. And negotiations, even in the absence of formal agreements, would generate information about the other side's capabilities and intentions and would help reduce the suspicions that fuel the security dilemma. Shifting to a no-first-use policy on nuclear weapons would also reduce tensions, though neither side is likely to agree to such a proposal.

Addressing the security dilemma does not mean acquiescing to all of Russia's demands, but it does suggest that treating Russia with the respect due a great power might lower tensions and lay the groundwork for more substantive agreements. The United States need not concede a sphere of influence to Moscow in the former Soviet space, but it should recognize that Russia has genuine security concerns regarding NATO expansion and democracy-promotion efforts in the former republics. The point is to reduce uncertainty and mistrust that could lead to an unintentional clash, which could rapidly escalate to large-scale conventional or nuclear conflict. 

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